

Writing in Classrooms: Missing Voices and Reflections

Nidhi Kunwar

Introduction

Writing is a medium to express our thoughts, ideas and views. It is a kind of communication in which a writer must be able to convey her/his views to the readers. We write because we want to share and discuss.

However, the shape which writing takes in our classrooms is in stark contrast to these ideas. We equate writing with ‘copying’ and ‘handwriting’. In a typical Indian classroom, one can find students religiously writing on topics such as ‘Ideal Student’, ‘Visit to Delhi’, ‘Our Dear Chacha Nehru’ and ‘Benefits of Libraries’. Students copy content from different guidebooks and spend hours producing beautiful handwriting and error-free work. Teachers encourage children to use help material and produce perfect writing in the first attempt. Writing, thus, gets reduced to a purely mechanical skill where there is no place for expression. We demand ‘perfection in the first attempt’ at any cost. Failure in achieving these standards results in criticism, lower marks and sometimes even punishment.

Research in the field, however, present writing in a different perspective. Studies indicate that writing becomes meaningful with the presence of ‘voice’ (Graves, 1983). Two components are extremely necessary for meaningful writing—desire to convey and sense of audience (Kumar, 1996). Thus, students must be encouraged to develop their writing pieces on the basis of these two factors. Teachers also play an extremely important role in developing students’ interest towards writing. The feedback provided by

teachers must be meaningful, and must emphasize on the quality of the content. Exclusive focus on mechanics and criticism from insensitive audience can end students’ desire to write (Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987; Kumar, 1996).

Clearly, there exists a gap between recent research on writing, and our writing pedagogy. We still design our classes on the basis of drill, practice and reinforcement. Expression, reflection and discussion are currently not valued in our writing classes. As a result, writing has become a difficult task for teachers as well as students since everyone prefers to evade it. The present paper is written with the aim of exploring issues related to writing, and generating reflections on the status of writing.

Writing in classrooms

Currently, the writing scenario in our classes is quite dismal. Writing and expression are considered as completely opposite fields. In the following analysis, the status of writing is explored from different perspectives to present a holistic picture of the existing state of affairs in our schools.

Faulty teacher training courses: Teacher training courses are expected to train teachers in foundational as well as pedagogy courses. It is believed that such training courses will create teachers who are well acquainted in the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology as well as pedagogy. However, the reality appears to be sharply different. Decade old syllabi are

transacted to teacher trainees without any reflection or revision, and the pedagogy courses that are transacted to students do not include any of the latest research. The teaching of 'writing' is not an exception in this regard. Teacher training programmes do not teach the pedagogy of writing in detail. Questions such as 'what are the recent researches in the field of writing', 'what are the implications of recent research for classroom teaching?' and 'how to approach writing as a process and not as a product?' are not discussed with the teacher trainees. In fact, the entire energy of aspiring teachers is used on creating fancy teaching aids based on the ideas of drill and practice. Unequipped with the knowledge of literacy pedagogy, teachers go on to create classes that are based on traditional and outdated theories.

Assumptions of teachers: Teachers are the most important part of our entire education system. Their perceptions, ideas, views, visions and thoughts greatly influence the students and the teaching pedagogy itself. If teachers have knowledge of recent writing research, then they can plan their lessons in a progressive way; but if teachers' knowledge is based on outdated theories, their planning may replicate the same. A teacher, who feels that writing is handwriting, will create classes dominated by drills for handwriting tasks; but a teacher who feels that writing is expression, will design classes that values content over mechanics. The limited knowledge of 'writing' that informs in-service and pre-service training programmes creates teachers who do not know how to use writing as a medium of expression. They equate writing with 'handwriting' and 'copying', and this is also reflected in their pedagogy. Jyoti (2004), found that teachers are not aware of the various forms of writing such as journal, narrative, poetic, etc. They accept writing as a means of communication but they completely neglect its creative aspect. Hence, students also learn to equate writing with copying.

Assumptions of students: As already pointed out, teachers encourage students to copy and they create students who also end up equating writing with copying and handwriting. Kunwar (2003) studied students' responses to writing and good writers. On being queried regarding their idea of a good writer, most students believed that qualities of a good writer included beautiful handwriting, perfect grammar, correct spellings and neat work. Some students even suggested using gel pens for beautiful handwriting, ensuring that all letters are of the same size, and copying perfectly from the board. Sadly, none of the responses spoke about the quality of content; for most students writing well was connected only with punctuation, grammar and handwriting.

Nature of writing work: Writing is generally viewed as copying in our classes. It does not provide any space for students' expression or views. A study of students' school writing conducted by Kunwar (2003) revealed that most of the content was related to conventional and traditional topics. Moreover, the content was Sanskritized and the language lacked spontaneity and looked rather contrived. There was also a similarity between the school writing samples and guidebooks. The teachers' feedback was limited to correction of wrong spellings; there was no productive feedback to students on the content of their writing.

Reasons to reflect

It is clear from the analysis that writing is taught as a mechanical skill in our schools. The pedagogical practices used in schools do not teach students to use writing in a functional or creative manner. When students are unable to use writing as a medium of expression, we blame it on the 'poor background' of students and try to evade the situation. Although students' background is an important factor in school performance, the time spent with the teacher is far more significant. Does the current pedagogy

allow teachers to create a meaningful writing environment and learning experiences for students? The focus shifts even further towards 'pedagogy' when we realize that the standards of writing across all types of schools, whether government or private, are similar. This indicates that it is not the background of students that is the sole factor responsible for students' failure, the pedagogy followed in schools is also an important factor. (Kumar, 1992; Sinha, 2000).

It must be acknowledged that pedagogy of reading and writing is a serious area of reflection and demands several improvements. A student's success at school depends on mastering these literacy skills. Now the question is: What should be the beginning point for bringing a change? Students define 'writing' in terms of what they are taught by their teachers, and teachers for their part are simply utilizing the pedagogy style that they have learnt during their training period. This highlights the major fault of our teacher education courses. It must be accepted that there is a huge gap between what we teach in basic theoretical courses and what we transact in pedagogy papers to our teachers. We educate our teachers about 'constructivism' and 'active nature' of children, but our pedagogical theories do not teach them how to fit practical teaching into that framework. In the foundation papers, teachers learn that the student is not *tabula rasa* or a 'blank slate'; but their lesson plans are full of worksheets and aids for drill, practice and reinforcement.

In the Indian context, the pedagogy of reading and writing is practically non-existent since most of the training programmes do not have any courses on the teaching of these literacy skills. Ironically, the components that we are neglecting in our courses form a core part of students' success in schooling. A teacher unequipped with the knowledge of pedagogy of literacy skills cannot enable his/her students to utilize these skills in a functional way. The ignorance of teachers can be really damaging for the entire education system.

Possibilities and alternatives

There is an urgent need to bring about changes in the system. The shortcomings and the flaws should not be allowed to continue, as they will damage the entire education system. Thus, on the basis of the above reflection, I have shortlisted the following suggestions for effecting improvements in the system.

- Pedagogy of reading and writing need to become the core components of every teacher training course, whether in-service or pre-service. Knowledge of the latest research findings will equip teachers to design their classes more effectively.
- The syllabus on the pedagogy of literacy skills needs to include detailed units on teaching 'writing'. The syllabus should provide teachers with the required theoretical framework so that writing is not reduced to the level of drill and practice. The syllabus needs to include components such as developmental stages of writing, importance of voice, role of teacher feedback, process writing, language experience approach, importance of ownership, role of errors, and assessment of writing. The teachers must understand the importance of 'content' over 'mechanics'.
- It is however not enough to just train the teachers, it is also necessary to provide the required support system for making writing meaningful for students. As reading and writing are connected, classrooms need to be organized in a way that provides scope for reading and writing. Provision of a print-rich environment through class libraries, space for students to write freely, creation of message corners—these are some of the opportunities which can encourage students to engage with writing in a functional manner.

- ‘Assessment’ comprises one of the major phases of the learning process. If assessment procedures are traditional, teaching is also forced to become traditional; but if assessment procedures are constructive and involve scope for thinking and reflection, teaching also takes a similar shape. This implies that assessment should be developmental in nature, and include methods such as portfolio assessment, journal entries, writing workshops, and self-assessment. If assessment techniques are progressive, teachers will also have the freedom to create meaningful learning opportunities for their students.

These recommendations have been made bearing in mind the current status of writing in our classrooms. If we wish to create meaningful writing classes, it is critical to equip our teachers with the knowledge of pedagogy of writing. Teachers also need to be aware of the latest research trends and their implications in the classroom. It is only by understanding the basics of literacy instruction that our teachers can do justice to the potential of writing, and develop students into ‘writers’ who can write with voice and reflections.

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Nidhi Kunwar is Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi. Her specialization is Language Education.

nidhikunwar80@gmail.com