

Research Series No. 34

THE PROBLEM OF DEAD LETTERS:
SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Susan Florio

Published By

The Institute for Research on Teaching
252 Erickson Hall
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824

June 1978

The work reported herein is sponsored by the Institute for Research on Teaching, College of Education, Michigan State University. The Institute for Research on Teaching is funded primarily by the Teaching Division of the National Institute of Education, United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the National Institute of Education. (Contract No. 400-76-0073)

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Co-Directors: Jere E. Brophy and Andrew C. Porter

Associate Directors: Judith E. Lanier and Richard S. Prawat

Editorial Staff

Editor: Janet Eaton

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Abstract

Why is it so hard to get people writing in school? The problem is a lack of meaningfulness. At the heart of a student's successful engagement in the writing task, experienced teachers told IRT researchers, was that it have meaning. This paper presents some results from an ethnographic study of a second-grade classroom where children wrote with success and enjoyment because their writing had meaning. The teacher had set up a community called Betterburg in her classroom, complete with law enforcement, cultural activities, commerce, welfare, and, most important for this study, a postal system.

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Preface

This report on the Classroom Study of the Teaching and Learning of Writing is an attempt to share the fruits -- including work in progress -- of a projected year-long period of data synthesis and analysis. The aim of this study is to understand more about writing skills as they are taught and acquired in the classroom. Toward that end, participant observation, interview, and videotaping were undertaken in one second-grade classroom during the 1977-78 school year. The intent of analysis of these diverse data is to develop a descriptive case study of the teaching and learning of writing. The work is influenced by theoretical and methodological perspectives from ethnography, sociolinguistics, ethnomethodology, and discourse analysis. Insights from curriculum research and development in the language arts are incorporated as well in our attempts to make sense of what we have experienced and recorded in the classroom. Hopefully, this study will enrich our knowledge about writing and its acquisition and will inform both pedagogy and future research.

The Problem of Dead Letters:
Social Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing¹

Susan Florio²

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?
Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to
a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more
fitted to heighten it than that of continually
handling these dead letters...?

Herman Melville,
Bartleby the Scrivener

Why is it so hard to get people writing in school? Of the language arts, writing is the most paradoxical. Its value is unquestioned by both educators and researchers, but writing is typically slighted in the course of a day in school and in the agenda for basic skills research (Graves, 1978).

In attempting to account for this paradox, some have pointed out that writing--and its pedagogy--require hard work. Thus it could be argued that people assiduously avoid difficult tasks, and so they avoid writing. Yet all of us can think of difficulty endured in the pursuit of a valued goal. What is more, from the ranks of the few who have taken a look at the teaching of writing comes a recommendation which is disturbing in its simplicity. We are advised, in a variety of voices, that the best way to teach writing is simply to let students do it! (Graves, 1978; Koch, 1970; Moffett, 1968)

Why, then, is it so hard to get people writing in school?

When researchers at the Institute for Research on Teaching set out to address this question, they were confronted with much the same finding as the lawyer who set out to discover the roots of Bartleby the Scrivener's

¹This paper appears in The Elementary School Journal, 1979, 80 (1).

²Susan Florio is a senior researcher in the Institute for Research on Teaching.

"derangement." The problem, in each case, was a lack of meaningfulness. At the heart of a student's successful engagement in the complex and difficult task of writing, experienced teachers told us, was that the writing task have meaning. Writing requires having something to express, an intended audience, and a chance for some kind of response (Moffett, 1968). Apparently the teachers with whom we spoke had shared just about enough of Bartleby's experience to abhor it.

Bartleby's first job entailed reading and sorting letters that were undeliverable--dead letters. From there he went to work copying out other people's ideas for a lawyer. Is it any wonder that, after years of such meaningless interaction with truncated human communication, his only response when asked by the lawyer to perform written tasks was, "I prefer not to"? Teachers told us that they preferred not to read 'dead letters' from their students--exposition going nowhere and written only to fulfill academic requirements. Similarly, the teachers preferred not to ask their students merely to copy out--to put their own words to someone else's ideas. The teachers knew that the perseverance and practice needed to master a craft as complex as writing relied on the functional relevance of written expression in the school lives of their students.

The teachers' insight suggests that writing may be avoided in school not simply because of its inherent difficulty, but because its undertaking, as one of many tasks in a busy school day, typically lacks connection to anything or anyone else in the lives of students or teacher. If this is the case, then managing to 'let children write' may amount to far more than pedagogical laissez faire. The teaching of writing may require ac-

tive and vigilant attention to the learning environments within which writing occurs to insure that written expression is motivated and that it goes somewhere.

The possibility that teachers can best serve the acquisition of writing by structuring both for and with students the social occasions within which writing might function meaningfully is evocative of what we know about the acquisition of speaking, another complex communicative skill. Both research and experience tell us that spoken language is acquired literally 'in the doing.' Children are welcomed as communicators even before their first words are uttered. Early on, children find that moves and sounds are expressive particularly in that they elicit action from other people. Children, in effect, practice the use of language not as preparation or training for social life, but as social life itself (see, for example, Cazden 1972).

The essential lesson from language acquisition for teachers of writing is not that skills are seldom taught directly by those who are experienced in their use, but that even the most rudimentary communicative attempts of novices have social meaning. Critical to a child's acquisition of language is that her/his emergent and stumbling efforts are heeded by others, and that early talk is meaningful by virtue of the child's membership in a community.

Classrooms contain the stuff of community, too, and therein lies potential for the writing done within them to be meaningful. Classrooms are both located within organized social worlds where meanings are shared and values held, and they individually constitute small communities with cumulative histories, shared beliefs, and rights and responsibilities of

membership. To learn more about the acquisition of writing skills and the ways in which writing in school can be meaningful to students, researchers at the Institute for Research on Teaching have been looking closely at one second-grade classroom in central Michigan. The classroom is notable because children do a lot of writing there. We have discovered, perhaps not coincidentally, that the nature of community in that classroom is notable as well.

To get to Mrs. French's second grade you must travel to the small community of Halifax, Michigan.* The town of nearly seven thousand is located in the shadow of the state capitol and a large public university. Although some of the residents are farmers, most of the children in Mrs. French's room have parents employed in one of the area's major activities--state government, education, and manufacturing.

Mrs. French's students attend Royal School, one of three elementary schools in Halifax. The contemporary school building houses about 170 students and contains one room for each grade from kindergarten through fifth. Approaching Mrs. French's room, you already have a sense of why she is well known in and around Halifax and why children anticipate being in her class. The classroom literally spills out into the corridor with bright colors and activity. Upon entering the classroom, you encounter yet another small community, one which the children have dubbed, "Better-burg."

* To protect the privacy of informants, all names of school, community, and personnel are pseudonyms.

As a map drawn by one of Mrs. French's students illustrates, the child-sized cardboard buildings of Betterburg dominate the physical space of the classroom (see Figure 1 appended to this paper). We have found as well that Betterburg dominates the social life and attendant writing that takes place within that physical space.

The members of Mrs. French's class populate Betterburg, filling its civil offices and devising its laws. Betterburg contains all the accoutrements of a community--law enforcement, cultural activities, commerce, welfare, and, most important for our purposes, a postal system. Of course, the room also contains all the other features of standard classrooms--blackboards, desks, bookshelves, and the like, but the dominance of the town is palpable. The children, for example, when asked upon leaving the class one day to draw maps of the important things and places in the room, overwhelmingly included, often in considerable detail, each aspect of the town. The content of their drawings is summarized in Table 1 (appended).

During the year they were observed, the children in Mrs. French's class wrote often and produced a wide variety of documents. Table 2 (appended) displays both the written products and the occasions when writing occurred on a typical day in the classroom (3/15/78). Included in the table is everything from the practice of motor skills, spelling, and the rules of punctuation to the use of metaphor, simile, and the complex rhetoric of persuasion. The table also illustrates that co-occurring with changes in written product are changes in the nature of the writing lesson. There is variation across writing activities in such features as how the students are appropriately to participate, whether the teacher serves as resource

or evaluator, and what aspect of the writing process is placed in the foreground of pedagogical attention.

On the day the table was compiled, one of the most daring and sustained writing activities involved children writing to manufacturers of their favorite games and candies. Betterburg was establishing a store, and the children needed to acquire goods to sell in the store. To turn a profit, it was necessary to obtain those goods at the wholesale price. And so, despite inexperience with the nuances and intricacies of spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure, the children undertook the sophisticated task of writing persuasively. They needed not only to engage their intended readers' attention in the doings of Betterburg, but to take the perspective of those who had never heard of the classroom town in order to include sufficient contextual information to make subsequent requests for goods sensible. It might be said that they were out of their depth, but, like young children acquiring speech, they were learning in the doing.

The performance of such complex social and linguistic operations through the medium of the letter was typical in Betterburg. Not only was letter writing observed almost daily over months of field work in the classroom, but, when the children were interviewed at the end of the year about their activities, the only writing activity on which they commented in detail was that of writing letters. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate:

Interviewer: I want to know about all the things you wrote this year.
Student 1: Yeah, we wrote people to come to our store.
Student 2: Letters.

Student 3: Oh, yeah. We wrote to our moms and dads and wrote to kids in our class.

Student 4: Our post office would get mail.

Additional evidence of the importance of letter writing in this classroom community can be found in Table 1.

It is noteworthy that the post office is among the places most frequently mentioned in the classroom maps, and that the mailboxes--both the one outside the post office and those fastened to the children's desks--are included in the maps of well over half the students. Finally, when Mrs. French and the students recorded the history of Betterburg in a yearbook, the text was constituted almost entirely of the letters which had been written during the town's existence.

The celebration of community in the classroom in the form of Betterburg appears to be related powerfully to the practice of letter writing as an expressive activity. If, as Dewey (1956) suggests, education fundamentally involves the child, whose "understandings are primarily personal and concrete" and the transmission of "values incarnate in the mature experience of the adult" (p.4), then the teaching of writing can be thought of as occurring at the interface between the personal world and the wider community. Writing is both the private struggle of a person with a pen and paper and it is the social activity of communication with another. Furthermore, writing takes place within communities. A pedagogy of writing which slights any of these features risks engaging students in the generation of 'dead letters' rather than in the practice of expression.

Betterburg affords immediate and explicit sharing of classroom mem-

bership and, as such, is a powerful organizer of the personal experiences of the students. However, the classroom town also provides the occasion for students to venture outside its borders into the wider adult community. This movement requires diligence and a raison d'etre. For writing, it constitutes, in the words of Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977) a

critical shift in the consciousness of the learner, a shift of attention from an immediate audience that shares the learner's experience and frame of reference to a larger, abstract, and unfamiliar audience. (p. 358)

In the classroom community of Betterburg, there is need for discourse across the boundaries. Since Betterburg operates in microcosm very much like Halifax, students write to government officials in the town and in the nearby state capitol for guidance in the establishment and enforcement of laws. Similarly, Betterburg's commerce, as we have already seen, requires that children obtain goods. Halifax and other nearby towns are, as well, potential markets for those goods which children reach by means of letters to individuals and to the local newspaper.

Because letters are a meaningful medium for Mrs. French's class, the postal system of Betterburg is important. In a sense, the postal system epitomizes Betterburg's integrity and links the class to the wider world. Instrumentally, the system insures that letters can leave the confines of the classroom and that responses can not only be distributed, but that they can be noted officially. Mailboxes serve as a tangible reminder that it is possible to have communicative contact with someone who is not physically present. Perhaps even more dramatically, however, the post office of Betterburg stands for the potential efficacy of the students in

the world of communication. An address is not only a place from which to express oneself, it is a place where one can be reached when someone wants to respond.

It has been said by some educators that literacy is related reflexively to efficacy in the world. In effect, these educators say that one writes if one can realistically anticipate a response, if one does not feel isolated and powerless; but that because one writes and is responded to, one does not feel isolated and powerless (Elsasser & John-Steiner 1977; Freire, 1970). Bartleby the Scrivener was immobilized by a social order which stymied both the chance for expression and the opportunity for response. Although Mrs. French's classroom is perhaps novel in its design, it paints in bold strokes something which is potentially available in all classrooms--the recognition of shared meanings as well as the need for and potential access to a world beyond the classroom by means of the written word. Exploitation of the classroom both as a community in itself and as part of a wider community potentially rescues the activity of writing from amounting to mere 'copying out' or to expression falling on deaf ears. As one child in Mrs. French's class put it, reflecting on the writing he had done in Betterburg, "I made my own words and I didn't copy people. The more I learned to write good letters, the better they got."

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Figure 1
Map drawn by student on 6/2/78. Instructions were to fill in "important things and places--as many as you can remember."

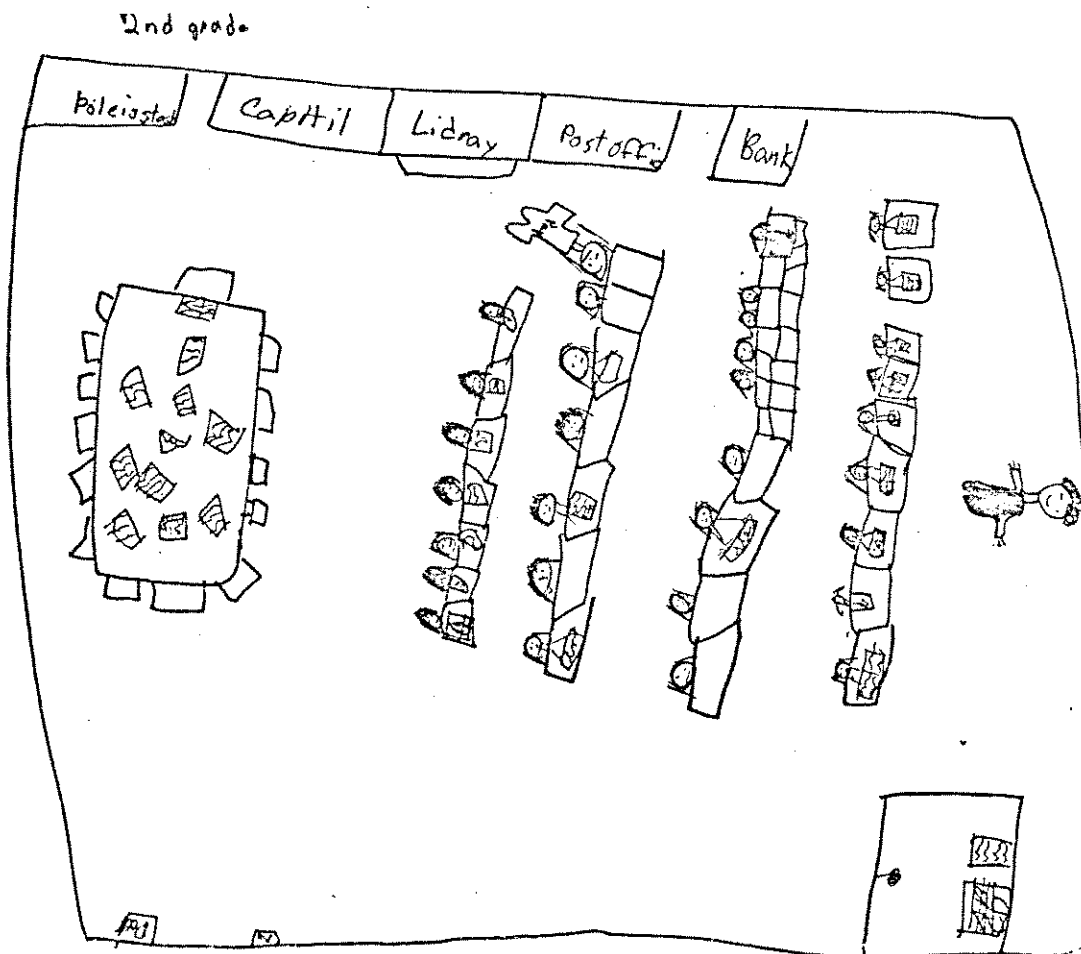


Table 1
Classroom Areas/Objects with Proportions Of
Students Naming Them in Classroom Maps

Area/Object	Proportion of Children Including it in Class- room Map
→Capitol building	83%
→Police station/jail	78%
Student desks	78%
→Post Office*	74%
→Department of Health, Education & Welfare	70%
→library	70%
teacher's desk	70%
→bank	65%
→mailboxes*	55%
reading table	35%
other tables	35%
chairs	22%
blackboard	13%
plants	13%
coatrack	13%
toys	13%
bulletin board, art work, books, shelves, cabinets, wastebasket, school bell, wall	10%
→ town-related area	
*area related to letter writing	

Table 2
Products & Occasions for Writing

(Field Notes,
March 15, 1978)

I. Writing Headlines/Teacher as Scribe

It is a typically busy morning in the second grade classroom. First, the children who have brought in articles from the previous evening's newspaper share them with the class. The teacher acts as scribe, making a headline out of each article.

- N. M. builder recycles tin cans into households. Until recently U.S.'s spendthrifts didn't conserve nation's resources.
- We're expecting a blackout because miners haven't obeyed President Carter's demands.
- Bicycles and motorcycles aren't safest, insurance company reports. They're larger than children and teenagers can handle, and we've got record highway injuries.

At the end of the presentation of news, children volunteer to come to the board and circle in the headlines instances of abbreviations, compound words, prefixes, suffixes, contractions and the like. The noise level rises as children wave their hands in the air, jump up and down, and call, "Me! I know it!"

II. Expository Writing and Editorial Work

Later in the morning some of the children work on the manuscript of a book the class is writing. The book is intended for very young children and their parents. It is going to be about becoming a good and happy person. Children have written entries and have drawn pictures to illustrate them. Now the task of layout--the spacing and matching of pictures and words remains. Some of the entries with which children are working include the following:

- Don't be crool to people because they mite be crool to you because you're teaching them to be crool.
- It's like planning how to make a building. You have to think how you want it to be before you start if you want it to be a beautiful building.

The teacher comments about the manuscript which is taking shape, "It came out real well considering how much they agonized over it."

III. Writing Answers on Worksheets

While the teacher spends the better part of an hour working with reading groups, children work quietly at their desks. Some of them catch up on their reading--from primers or from library books. Others work busily on dittoed worksheets, circling, marking with x's, and writing an occasional word in answer to a fill in the blank question.

IV. Writing Letters

During seatwork, some of the children are polishing up letters which they have written to companies manufacturing their favorite toys and candies. Since the entire class is planning to have a store this spring, the children have decided to solicit help from the companies. Children have written to the makers of Flair pens, Cracker Jacks, Mounds, DC Comics. The letter to Parker Brothers is as follows:

Dear Parker Brothers,

Hi! My name is Marnie at Royal School in second grade and we have a town in our classroom. Our town's name is Betterburg because we want to make things better. We'll have a store in our town. We have a police station, Bank, capitol, Library, H.E.W. and a Post Office. My teacher said I could sell anything in the world I wanted to and I chose you because we have some of your games and we play with them all the time and we like them a lot. I always want to buy the games but we don't got enough money. When I'm over to somebody's house I look at the games. If I find a Parker Brothers game I want to play it but if they don't have a Parker Brothers game I don't want to play a game. I have to buy your good games at a good wholesale price or we won't make any money. Please, please give us it at a good wholesale price. We really need it bad. Just send the games and bill. We'll be sure to pay the bill if you send the games with the letter. Thank you for reading my letter.

Your friend,
Marnie

Table 2 (continued)

V. "Meta Writing" - Spelling words, Making concrete sentences

After the children return from recess, the teacher, standing at the front blackboard, asks them to clear their desks and take out pencils and spelling books. She draws lines on the blackboard. Then she says, "We've been neglecting your spelling words." She asks them to pick out the two hardest words from this week's spelling list and write a sentence using each word. "In order to be a sentence, it has to tell something. I'm not going to spell any words for you; just sound them out. It isn't a spelling test. The only word I care about your spelling correctly is the spelling word."

The children write quietly at their desks. As they finish, a few of them bring their sentences up to the teacher. She tells them, "Sit down." Finally, as the whispering and shifting in seats increases, the teacher says, "Stand up if you are ready." The teacher calls on children standing at their desks to read their sentences. Here is a bit of what follows:

Teacher calls on Christy.

Christy. Do you want to clean your room now?"

Teacher: I should have...OK, you can either tell something or ask something. She asked, What did she put at the end of her sentence?

Children: A question mark!

Another child is called on.

Kristina: I clean my room every day.

Teacher: Oh, you do really? Is she telling or asking?

Children: Telling.

Teacher: I'm going to ask your mother about that, Kristina!

Jack: I clean the living room everyday.

Teacher: He told you, right. Jack, would you like to come over to my house tonight?

Children: Laughter.

Sam: He is sleeping

Teacher: What did Sam do to the word? He put the ing on, a suffix. Don't do that on the spelling test tomorrow, but it's alright.

VI. Cursive Writing Practice

After many of the children have shared their sentences, the teacher turns to the lines she has drawn on the blackboard. She says as she does this in brisk, clipped speech "Up, up! Sit up! Feet on floor. When I say ready, what do you do?" The students reply, "Do we have to write in cursive?" The teacher, smiling, says, "Yup." What follows is a lesson in cursive writing in which students use the spelling words from their sentences. The teacher coaches in colorful language--each motion of the pen corresponds to a phrase which the children know. Some of them talk along with her: "Rainbow up, straight back. Rocker, come around, straight, rocker." As children finish their words, they are asked to bring them up to show to the teacher.

VII. Imaginative Writing

After the children finish their cursive writing, the teacher asks them to sit in a circle at her feet at the front of the room. It is nearing St. Patrick's day, and the teacher has brought in a story about Leprechauns. The children listen quietly. Sometimes the teacher stops to ask questions about the story. The children answer in chorus. After the story there is just time enough before lunch for the children to do one more thing. The teacher, in a soft voice, says, "I want you to think. Shut your eyes. You're a Leprechaun now, hiding under your mushroom and you're thinking, 'If I were a Leprechaun, what magic would I play?' What magic would you play if you were a Leprechaun?"

As the children open their eyes and are sent back to seats, the teacher passes out bright green paper shamrocks. She asks them to write down on lined paper the trick they thought of to play. She says that after writing them, the children will paste them onto the shamrocks and put them in the hall "for everyone to see." She also says they can copy them over into St. Patrick's Day cards to bring home to their mothers.

After the assignment is made, the room is alive with whispering and children leaning over one another's papers. The teacher stands at the board, and as children call out words she spells them for them on the board. As children finish, they bring their tricks up to the teacher. One student reads his aloud to the teacher, "If I were a Leprechaun, I'd use my magic finger to turn trash into flowers because I'd like to make the world a better place." The teacher replies, "He accomplished something with his trick. It wasn't wasted."