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TEACHING WRITING IN THE ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Applying a Process-Conference Approach

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The Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Education Program (AITEP) is an affirmative action program offering entry to teacher education courses at James Cook University to Aboriginal and Islander students who do not meet direct entry requirements. The program operates with a 'stretched' first year. First year subjects in the regular teacher education courses are spread over three semesters instead of two, and students are required to undertake additional subjects - Study Skills and Oral Communications, Written Communications, and Introductory Mathematics during that 18 months. This paper began as a personal exploration into the way in which the teaching of writing within these additional subjects had developed and to provide a greater understanding of the process of teaching writing.

Wanting to write about teaching writing implies that I accept the link between writing and learning. According to Emig (1977, p.122), "writing represents a unique mode of learning - not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique." Smith (1982, p.33) claims that writing modifies and develops whatever was its source. By writing what we think we know, we develop what we potentially know. "Writing does more than reflect underlying thought, it liberates and develops it." Through writing we can capture our thoughts in a way that allows us to analyse, assess and rethink them.

Writing is claimed to promote the development of the analytic thinking and formal reasoning so valued in Western culture, and in academic circles in particular. According to Wells -

...it is clear that it is particularly in the *creation* of written text that the individual is made most aware of the symbolising function of language, and the power it has to capture experience so that it may be considered, questioned and modified in the interests of increased understanding and future applications.

(Wells, 1981, p.254)

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While I do not want to focus on theories of writing and cognitive development here, it appears that the potential for learning from writing must be given consideration in any writing program for tertiary students. We also need to recognise that the genres of writing used at university reflect the ways of constructing and organising meanings within different disciplines (Christie, 1984) and that the construction of texts, according to genre, is culturally determined reflecting the organisation of experience, information, and ideas that construct meaning within our culture.

When AITEP was first developed, Study Skills and Written Communications were treated as separate subjects. In the past two years these two subjects have been combined to provide a more integrated approach based on whole language development. Together the two subjects are allocated four hours per week for the three semesters of the stretched first year. Compared to courses run for open entry students at, for example, City University New York, where such courses also earn credit points (Slaughter and Wiener, 1980) this time allocation places considerable restraint on the sort of writing program that can be developed as part of those subjects. In addition, because students are also undertaking subjects which contribute to their final qualifications, the additional subjects must complement rather than compete with these regular subjects. For a writing program, this means that students are not expected to write outside the set contact hours - a considerable limitation. It also means that the writing undertaken can bear a direct relevance to the immediate needs of students in their regular subjects. Topics and genres dealt with in the writing program reflect the type of writing demanded.

The students within AITEP come from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide variety of language experiences. Some have lived totally within Anglo-European contexts, and the language they speak reflects this. Others come from urban or rural Aboriginal communities and speak varying degrees of Aboriginal English. Yet others are Torres Strait Islanders from either the mainland or remote islands, and speak Torres Strait Creole or Meriam as their first language. Some just missed out on gaining direct entry to university through their Grade 12 results. Others left school in Grade 8. Teaching writing to such a diverse group may appear difficult but students are all aspiring to the same goal - that of competency in "written educated English" (Roy, 1984, p.440) and all are, to various degrees, learning that language. Torres Strait Islander students come to university very conscious of the fact

that English is their second (or third) language and are keen to undertake subjects that develop their English competency.

But some speakers of Aboriginal English have been taught to view their language as merely 'bad' English and worry about what they term 'slang'. For all students, discussion on the nature of language, dialect and register can contribute to their understanding of the learning task ahead of them. The introduction of the concept of linguistic appropriateness, and audience in particular, helps students to come to terms with the relationship between their own home language and written educated language.

While the goal of any writing program for Aboriginal and Islander students within a conventional university framework would be the development of competency in written educated English, the student's home language cannot be ignored. Part of the function of AITEP is to foster Aboriginal and Islander identity within the university and language is a significant marker of identity. This is not just for purposes of idealism. Student identity within the university is a significant factor in university success (Wright, 1982). In addition, the role of AITEP staff can only be achieved if AITEP staff display respect and valuing of the student's home culture. Valuing and respecting the home language of students, and promoting its expression, contribute to this respect of culture. While it does not necessarily meet the immediate needs of students, there is also the hope that promotion of the student's home language will encourage students to write in that language and so develop a body of literature that will provide linguistically and culturally appropriate reading materials for some of the children the students will be teaching.

The fact that the students are all involved in teacher education courses does have an influence on the writing program. AITEP additional subjects not only teach, but are also seen as models of teaching. Thus it is desirable that the writing pedagogy in the additional subjects supports that presented in the language arts subjects within teacher education programs. Fortunately, the process-conference approach to writing advocated for schools is also appropriate for adult learners. As well, process-conference approaches to writing are also being advocated by teachers of English as a Second Language (Davidson, 1985).

Talking about a process-conference approach to writing is fraught with dangers because the implementation of such an approach can vary widely. In looking at the 'process', one can talk about three processes - prewriting, writing, re-writing - or more poetically, 'prevision, vision and revision' (Murray, 1978, p.86)

or one can expand the process to provide a more comprehensive model such as the following:

Experience or problem → Pre-writing → Draft Writing →
Revising and Editing → Production and Publication →
Reader's Response → Writer's attitude.

(Walsh, 1981, p.21)

Many students within AITEP grew up in schools where compositions were written then marked rather than responded to, where getting the spelling and punctuation right was more important than the message, and where writing was a chore to be done for the teacher. For them adapting to a process-conference approach to writing is not always easy. Whilst process writing in primary schools is based on the observation that children want to write, this is not necessarily so with adults. Students sometimes display a degree of cynicism towards the approach as it is so different from their conception of what English teaching is about. Exploring the theory behind process-conference approaches to writing helps these students see the validity of the approach.

Observations of students in writing sessions indicates that some are so worried about correctness that getting anything down on paper appears extremely difficult. For these students, the first goal of any writing program must be to develop their own confidence in writing. Thus students need to write initially about subjects they feel confident with, such as their own experiences and their own opinions. They also need their work read by someone who appreciates their message. Fellow AITEP students provide such appreciative readers.

Like most writing programs, pre-writing activities focus on talk and on reading. Whilst most process-conference approaches stress freedom of choice, within AITEP we are more prescriptive to ensure students gain experience in the types of writing required for assessment. Students are required to undertake a wide range of writing activities within the university and practice teaching situation and the writing program must reflect this range. Part of the writing discussion focuses on the genre, purpose and audience for writing as well as on the topic. Discussing topics before writing allows students to test out their ideas and arguments on others first before they commit them to the permanency of the page. For students who come from backgrounds where they are probably the first in their family to attend university, the promotion of such discussion in class contributes to the socialisation of students

into a student role. As all other students in the writing program are Aborigines or Islanders, they can develop an Aboriginal and Islander student role with their own style of discussion, allowing each other the support of the group as they take risks with words and ideas. Talk can also serve as a mediator between what the student has read and what she will write. Talking about what they have read allows students to process information before writing it and so free them from the exact words of another author. The danger with talk, however, is that the students prefer it to writing and there is considerable difficulty in "switching from the active, sharing, often exciting talking and actual experience to the lonely, individual private practice of writing" (Protherough, 1983, p.125).

Reading provides not only ideas and information to incorporate within one's own writing, it also provides students with a model of writing, from the conventions of transcript to the subtle differences of register and discourse structures in various genres (Smith, 1982). Within an academic context, the writing of academics serves as a model for academic writing, but students are not expected to write text books or journal articles in undergraduate courses. Instead, they write reaction papers, and essays and reviews and curriculum rationales. Thus, if students are to learn to write such pieces, they must have the opportunity to see examples of other students' writing from which they can draw conclusions about such writing. Whilst "reading like a writer" (Smith, 1982, p.179) is largely an unconscious process, activities can be introduced to help students 'see' certain features of writing. Activities such as organising discourse into paragraphs, sequencing paragraphs into essays, cloze exercises focusing on connectives can all help students explore how others have structured writing. The important factor is that such activities do not take over as the main focus of the reading. While reading will provide a model for writing, it must be seen by students as a communicative act and the main aim of reading must relate to meaning. One strategy that I have found particularly successful is writing examples myself. Not only does this provide the students with samples of particular sorts of writing, it also conforms to Smith's notion that teachers should demonstrate writing for their students (Smith, 1978, p.201).

Observing students during writing sessions highlights the wide range of approaches to getting the first draft down onto paper. Some students start writing immediately and have the page covered in no time at all. For others, the margin must be ruled and the heading neatly written and underlined before composing can begin. Others appear quite spasmodic. And then there are those for whom each and every word is a labour. While the revision process can

achieve a great deal, the first draft appears all important in that it provides the basic fabric that can be then shaped as desired. In this stage we see writers "shaping at the point of utterance" (Britton, 1982). One can see some students write a sentence, a phrase, a word, then literally sit back and admire it, then continue their writing stimulated to continue by their satisfaction with what they have already produced. For other students, the need to get it right to begin with inhibits their ability to get anything down on paper to work with. Britton (1982) sites evidence to suggest that such difficulties may be caused by students being trapped into rigid plans and precise rules. At this stage of the writing process, it appears that what the writer needs is "conditions of great freedom" - freedom to concentrate on ideas rather than mechanics; freedom to screw up the paper and start again; freedom to explore ideas. Adult students, however, also feel the pressure of time and they don't want freedom to go on the wrong track. Thus, while creating an atmosphere of freedom, we need also to assist students to control their writing so that they achieve their purposes.

For students who grew up in a tradition focusing on correct writing, it is useful to distinguish between revising to develop meaning and editing to focus on mechanical conventions such as spelling and punctuation. Zamel (1983), in studying the composing processes of advanced ESL students, noted that the least competent writer used revision merely to fix up local problems but rarely made changes that affected meaning, whereas the more competent writers were able to use revision to improve, expand and refine their writing. Students who have had little experience in revising really need to learn how to revise, to see its potential for improving both thinking and writing. Here again, the teacher can be a useful model and I show students examples of the messy revision processes in my own writing.

In the revision process, writers need to consider if they have said what they meant to say, and also put themselves in the place of another reader. To assist the students develop their ability to revise their own work, peer response is promoted. Thus students read each others' work and respond to it. This practice also contributes to the establishment of group support within AITEP and, by encouraging students to read and respond to each others' work within lectures, it is hoped that students will continue this responding out of lectures and it is apparent that this practice is commonplace. It is also hoped that by responding to the work of others, students will develop skills so that they can similarly respond to their own work - part of becoming an autonomous student within the university. According to Newkirk (1984), peer response

has some limitations. Peers tend to appreciate the writing for the meaning being conveyed and are more willing to read into the text. This is important for the mutual development of confidence. However, if the writing is aimed for a wider community, then such responding will not be entirely appropriate. Hence the students need full responses from teachers.

Responding to students' writing in face-to-face conferences can be quite a threatening experience for teachers and they certainly have their own language competencies tested. When faced with students' writing, often the local errors and mistakes tend to jump out and take one's attention and sometimes it takes real effort to focus on more global meanings. Working with students in conferences, however, seems to offer the greatest potential for developing students' competencies. It takes time to develop the relationship of trust necessary for successful conferences. Initially, most students are hesitant about conferences, expecting their work to be marked. They worry because the work isn't finished or neat. Students are often quite surprised when asked a question that relates to the content of the writing. As the course progresses, students recognise that the teacher is interested in what they say as well as how they say it, to the extent that some students good naturedly accuse us of just 'dorrying' (that is, being nosey) when reading their work. To some extent they are right, and reading their writing does provide a way of getting to know students.

Once students are comfortable in the conference situation then there is real potential to extend the students' thinking and writing. Here teachers can focus on being "warm demanders" ensuring that students are pushing themselves. In some instances, the emphasis is on extending the thinking expressed in the writing, encouraging students to justify their statements or provide supporting information, or go one step further. In other situations the focus will be on language - finding a better phrase, checking relative pronouns, helping students find ways of distancing themselves from information, or using a more formal style. Often it is refining the language to clarify the thoughts, for example, reorganising paragraphs to focus on particular ideas.

Sometimes a student's writing will contain multiple problems and the teacher has to make a judgment as to where to give help to ensure the student can complete a satisfying piece of writing. Here we need to focus on one or two areas only and make a note of other areas that need attention so that they can be built into the program at a later date. Within AITEP, we always have intentions of carrying out workshops with small groups of students who have common problems as recommended by Shaughnessy (1977) for basic writing students.

Time seems a problem, however, especially as time in workshops would take away from time in writing. So far we have focused on students' writing and have tried to deal with problems within the conference. What we need is to develop our own materials that will provide us with a prepared action for a specific problem as it arises.

Because of the demands placed on teachers in conferencing, it is sometimes useful to collect students' work and respond to it at leisure and with more time to carefully assess what advice to give students. While this is useful as a means of looking at the students' writing, I find the sort of feedback I generally want to give is difficult to write, hence a face-to-face conference still results.

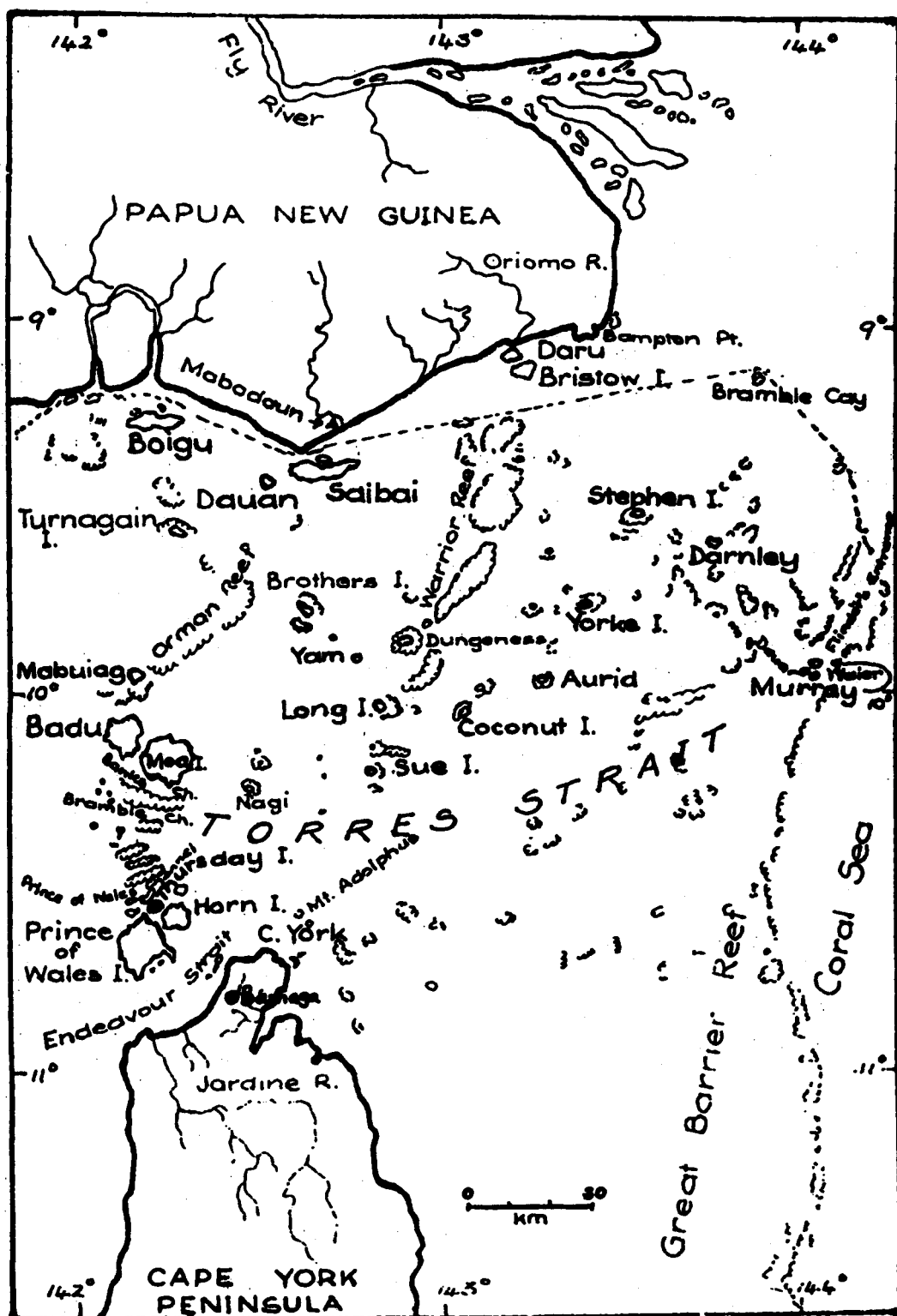
Whilst editing for correctness focuses on the conventions of print rather than meaning, students still need to master such conventions. Local errors may not affect the meaning of students' writing but they do influence how the reader views the writing and, for some lecturers and practice teaching schools, good writing is equated with correct writing. Errors in spelling, punctuation, inflections can send messages that AITEP students can ill afford to send. Thus students need to learn the skills of editing. Referring to how other writers have carried out tasks is a useful technique for checking conventions.

Integral to the process-conference approach is the concept that writing should be read by others and so publishing of writing is promoted. For much of the writing undertaken by students, 'publishing' means handing in to the lecturer for marking and many of the writing tasks undertaken at university do not make for interesting reading. Within AITEP, however, there are avenues for students to publish their work through *Black Voices*, a journal, and *AITEP News*, a more informal publication. Some activities within the writing program lend themselves to being distributed amongst students, for example, reviews of children's books, and reports from practice teaching. To avoid overloading students with work, we do not ask that everything written in the introductory subjects be taken to the publication stage. This does pose problems, however, because it denies any real reason for undertaking revision and editing. This highlights one of the significant problems with such a course. How does one promote authentic writing for real purposes and real audiences within a course that was originally designed to develop writing skills so that students would be able to apply these skills to the writing tasks set in other subjects.

A process-conference approach to teaching writing does not focus on skills-based instruction. Within a university context, writing is not a skill. Rather, it is an enabling discipline, through which students create meanings. By conforming to the specific genres of disciplines within the university, the students create the meanings of that specific discipline. Whilst the organisation of academic writing organises our knowledge and experiences in ways appropriate to academic thinking, we cannot apply rigid formulae to how students will arrive at such appropriate organisations of knowledge. Thus, within the process-conference approach to teaching, we must ensure students have the flexibility to follow their own paths to the appropriate organisation, allowing them to determine when to stop reading and when to start writing, when to write and when to rewrite. While the process-conference approach to writing maintains that the process is more important than the product, that dictum only applies to the actual teaching of writing. For students the product is important and the most effective product will come from students determining which is the most effective way for them to use the process.

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