Writing in Indian Schools: The Product Priority

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Introduction

This paper attempts to give an insight into what constitutes as writing in Indian schools, and the underlying assumptions about writing and its teaching. I will begin with a brief outline of writing tasks assigned in the majority of our schools. Next, I will describe and critique the guiding framework for assumptions about writing and its teaching in our schools—the Product approach. Finally, I will present a research-based alternative perspective on writing, and its implications for the teaching of writing.

Writing in Indian Schools

Writing activities in our language classrooms, if we may call it so, usually consists of writing the word-meanings of difficult words, dictation, sentence construction, fill in the blanks, and question-answers. A close look at these writing assignments reveals that most of them have a very narrow approach (Britton et al., 1975; Applebee, 1982). Such writing activities do not give children the opportunity to compose their thoughts. In fact Applebee & Langer (2011), describe such type of writing activities as "writing without composing" (p.15). This is because composing is in fact a complex act that requires the orchestration of various skills to shape the text as coherent and whole (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Applebee, 1982). However, unfortunately, we find that in our classrooms, writing is simply viewed as writing correctly. Furthermore, it is also associated with memorizing what has been copied from the blackboard or textbook. It is fairly common to see children memorizing not only definitions of grammar concepts, but also answers of textbook questions and essays to reproduce in tests.

Present Assumptions About Writing: The Product Approach

What does the fact that children memorize texts to reproduce them in tests convey about our perception of writing? It reflects the view that writing is only about the ability to encode. Thus, the mechanics of writing (spelling, form, etc.) gets emphasized in writing instructions, and exercises such as correct formation of letters, *sulekh,* and dictation become a norm. In addition, it is also believed that writing progresses in a linear manner. Therefore, the teaching of writing gets fragmented. Children are first taught writing by drawing standing and sleeping lines, then they move on to learning the formation of letters and subsequently, in a year or two, they are introduced to writing sentences. As a result, children are subjected to mindless exercises of copying and practicing alphabet formations which convey to them that writing is a matter of drill and practice and is bereft of any meaning (Kumar, 1991).

The Product Approach

The above-mentioned understanding of writing which is so seeped into our school system was unfortunately not based on any systematic

research. Instead, according to Britton et al. (1975), "they are derived from an examination of the finished products of professional writers, from whose works come both the categories and the rules for producing instances of them" (p. 4). So in an effort to understand what writing should be, the exemplary works of writers were analysed, and their characteristics were presented to students as features of good writing to be followed. Furthermore, these features were reduced to teachable formulas for students to reproduce on paper, believing it will turn them into good writers. It is because the focus was on the finished product to understand and define writing that this approach came to be known as the product approach. However, the attention given to the product overlooked the need to inquire into the processes of writing or how this very product came into being (Hairston, 1982; Calkins, 1986; Britton et al. 1975).

The product approach also assumed that other than providing a formula for good writing, the written product of children should be minutely corrected for mechanical errors. This was seen as the key to making them better writers. However, Flower and Hayes (1977) argue that "analyzing the product often fails to intervene at a meaningful stage of writer's performance" (p. 450), whereas, observing and intervening in the process of writing helps children develop effective strategies for writing (Calkins, 1986).

These assumptions about writing led to three significant myths. First, it gave rise to the popular perception that good writing is a talent which only few people have. Therefore, writing was seen as something which cannot be learnt as it is god-gifted (Hairston, 1982; Flower & Hayes, 1977). Moreover, this assumption about writing hides the fact that every writer goes through a writer's block and several drafts and revisions before coming up with the final work.

Second, these assumptions perpetuated the belief that writing is a onetime act. In other words, thoughts are neatly organized in the writer's mind even before they begin to write (Hairston, 1982). Consequently, writing came to be understood as a linear act more about putting words on paper and editing them. However, research suggests otherwise. Investigations reveal that writing is in fact a recursive and a problem-solving process (Flower & Hayes, 1977, 1981; Graves, 1983). While writing, a writer has to constantly orchestrate many constraints together. These constraints act as problems. For example "What do I want to convey?", "Who should I focus on as my audience?", "How should I convince my audience?", "Should it be an entertaining piece or informative?", "Is this sentence appropriate?" etc. These problems are innumerable and concern global as well as local level goals such as choice of words or sentence. Furthermore, this juggling of constraints leads to numerous acts of decision-making on the part of the writer to keep the text moving. In addition, writing moves recursively. Writers keep planning, drafting and revising all through the process of writing rather than one following the other (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Hence, writing requires strategies to control these processes and not just rules.

Finally, the belief that by knowing the features of good writing one can be a good writer has had a huge impact on the teaching of writing. Calkins (1986) rightly points out that "most of us in school believe that the way to write is to pick up a pen, put down a main idea followed by three supporting paragraphs (p.16)." This approach to writing not only makes it a frustrating exercise for children but produces a writing that is so dead and similar that even different productions of it may look no better than photocopies of each other. One fails to see the child's own impression in his writing, i.e. his/her voice. Ultimately, children stop investing in and caring about their writing since it is so devoid of meaning and purpose for them.

Features of a product approach classroom

Even a surface level inquiry into the teaching of writing in the majority of Indian classrooms will reveal that they follow the product approach model. Some of the features of this approach include:

Over emphasis on mechanics

Over emphasis on the mechanics of writing is the most significant feature of the product approach to writing. Its over-concern with the form and mechanics of writing, and discomfort with errors makes students believe that good writing is nothing but correct writing. Consequently, a deep worry for errors stops students from writing (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Prescriptive

The characteristic feature of a product approach classroom is its prescriptive nature. The features of good writing are explicitly prescribed to the students to the extent that sometimes, essays, paragraphs and answers are dictated to them. Students' personal meaning, voice and content become insignificant in a product-based classroom. In prescribing, teachers erroneously presume that there is a fixed formula for writing a good composition. However, giving formulas for writing often produces formulaic pieces (Perl, 1980).

Authoritarian

The prescriptive nature of the product approach classroom puts the teacher in control of the students' writing. It is the teacher who assigns the topic, sets the time and pace, and decides the form for the students to write in. Therefore, all decisions regarding the students' writing are made by the teacher instead of the students themselves. We have earlier seen that writing is a problem-solving and decision-making process. However, decision making by the teachers makes the students so dependent on them that at every step of their writing, students look for the teacher's approval. Moreover, it robs the students of any sense of ownership towards their writing and through all the grades, they write for a single audience who is also an authority audience—the teacher.

An Alternative Perspective: Writing as a Thought Process

It is time we brought in a research-based understanding of writing in the Indian classrooms which is the process approach to writing. Process approach to writing views writing as a thought process. When we write, we are primarily engaging with our thoughts; it is our thoughts which go through several drafts and again, it is our thoughts that we revise to make our writing effective and powerful. The product approach, because of its emphasis on the product, disregards the process of writing that a writer goes through. Therefore, it does not take into account the fact that the product is the outcome of a process, and if we need to improve the product we cannot do so by ignoring the process.

The underlying assumptions about the product method approach to writing and its traditional model of the teaching of writing were severely criticized in a historic seminar in 1966 at Dartmouth College in America (Nystrand, 2006). Significantly, the Anglo-American seminar of prominent scholars argued that it was not the curricula which needed restructuring but the understanding of language teaching. They observed that teaching of writing was "less to do with techniques and more and more with fundamental insights about language processes" (Nystrand, 2006, p. 13). This observation led to a rigorous inquiry into the act of writing in the decade of 1980s. The results of the inquiry described writing as a complex

cognitive process and completely changed how writing was conceptualized and taught.

Earlier to this, Vygotsky (1962), in his seminal work *Thought and Language* explicated writing to give an insight into how it works. He called it a "deliberate structuring of web of meaning" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 100) which demands the making of meaningful connections between different concepts otherwise not obvious. Further elaborating on Vygotsky's description, Emig (1977) explained that in the process of detailing and making new connections, a writer indulges in analysis and synthesis which requires the breakup of earlier conceptual connections and the making of new ones, thus, making writing an effective tool for negotiation and development of thoughts.

Furthermore, freedom from actual situations, constant evaluation of thoughts, and analysis and synthesis of concepts help the writer to transform his/her experience into knowledge. Therefore, writing cannot be understood simply as a motor exercise, as encoding or as merely reflecting thoughts. It is a tool which liberates us from the present and gives us the power to explore the abstractness of thoughts (Smith, 1994).

Implication for Teaching: Teachers as Writers

The way to break away from the frustrating and meaningless exercise happening in the writing classrooms is to empower teachers in the craft of writing as well as teaching equally well. This can only happen by reconceptualizing the teacher training programme. Unless teachers are themselves writers and are aware of the writing process, they will keep correcting the product rather than intervening in the process of writing. Graves (1983) believes that a language teacher has to know the "twin craft of teaching and writing" (p.3). Unless the teacher is an insider to the process of writing

and knows writing from the inside, he/she cannot be a writing teacher. Graves (1983) emphasizes that like any craft which is learnt in a studio, writing has to be learnt with a teacher who is a practitioner in the field. A practitioner will know how to guide the child to shape his/her thoughts without taking the control away from him/her. Research shows, it is intervention and scaffolding in the process of writing which leads to the enhancement of writing ability and not red-inking the product. Correcting the product may tell the child what needs to be done, but it is intervention in the process that tells the child how to do it.

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