

# Writing Across the Curriculum: The Accent Is on Learning

By Judith P. Nembhard

**L**ike other educators, Seventh-day Adventist teachers have become aware of students' writing deficiencies and are doing something about the problem. As they try to upgrade students' writing competency and bridge the literacy gap, they, like their counterparts in secular institutions, are investigating the merits of cross-disciplinary writing.

Involving teachers from every discipline in teaching writing offers a workable means of improving the quality of student writing. However, to implement such a program, educators must clearly understand the goal of writing across the curriculum. As a collaborative writing effort, writing across the curriculum should extend the use of language more *widely* rather than simply more correctly.

## More Than Grammar

To many educational administrators, good writing means grammatical correctness. They think of writing in terms of subject-verb agreement, verb-tense consistency, and knowing when to use *who* and *whom*. They want every comma and semicolon in its place.

These concerns are obviously important and have a place in a teacher's expectations for students' written work. However, they are not of first-level importance in the teaching of writing. Concentrating on them can obscure the real purpose for writing.

The goal of writing is to communicate effectively and efficiently. The sooner everyone understands this, the easier will be the task of developing a successful program of writing across the curriculum.

## Grammar — or Clarity?

Placing clarity, logical development, and careful thinking ahead of correctness by no means signals a new permissiveness in English classrooms. Correct grammar matters; it is a sign of literacy among adults as well as youth. However, teaching grammar skills is still the Eng-

**A program of cross-disciplinary writing will have wider appeal to faculty if they understand that teaching writing means teaching their discipline, not grammar and mechanics.**

lish teacher's job, not a task for other faculty. Teachers in other disciplines should not be expected to teach students grammar or to make it the central focus of written work they assign; they should simply hold students responsible for knowing and using it well.

When students find that their grade in biology and history is affected by their knowledge of grammar skills, they will use greater care and attention when writing for those courses. However, a program of cross-disciplinary writing will have wider appeal to faculty if they understand that teaching writing means teaching their discipline, not grammar and mechanics.

## Writing as Process

Today we know a great deal about writing as a process. We know that students' writing growth comes, not from an accumulation of skills, but through their experiencing writing in all its interactive stages. They need to do rehearsing or prewriting, drafting, and revising or reshaping.

Through frequent practice, and with guidance from their teachers, students come to understand and follow these stages, learning how to be patient as their skills mature. Frequency in practicing the process, Donald Murray tells us, is essential to the progress of every good writer.<sup>1</sup> In writing across the curriculum, with every teacher providing ample opportunity for students to write, students' writing competence, as well as their confidence, has a chance to grow.

## Writing Promotes Learning

At the heart of a successful writing program lies the idea that writing promotes learning. This is probably the most forceful argument in favor of cross-disciplinary writing. The initial concepts for this viewpoint originated with British educator James Britton, whose extensive research and resulting theories sparked the movement in his own country and energized efforts in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

We use what Britton calls "expressive" language to objectify our perceptions of reality. This use of language helps us to order experience and knowledge and to make it represent our own understanding.

Thus language becomes a tool for discovering meaning and shaping ideas in

such a way as to communicate that meaning to others. Writing, then, helps students work through information to arrive at "new knowledge." Says James Howard, author of a writing-to-learn program for schools, "Writing is an essential means of learning, and the best reason for writing in schools is to learn."<sup>3</sup>

Howard's statement corroborates Janet Emig's clear assertion that "writing is a mode of learning."<sup>4</sup> Viewed from this perspective, writing itself, rather than mechanics and grammar, becomes the focus of our efforts to establish a program in writing across the curriculum.

Teachers in all disciplines must be persuaded of the truth of this central concept—that writing promotes learning—before they will devote time and effort to provide worthwhile writing assignments for their students. They must understand that "a writing regimen is a learning regimen."<sup>5</sup>

English teachers, who today know a great deal about writing as process, are fully aware of this. They can therefore confidently invite their colleagues in other disciplines to cooperate in infusing the entire curriculum with this mode of learning. Already the response is heartening as schools and entire school systems promote a vigorous writing program for all students.<sup>6</sup>

Learning through writing and learning the subject being written about are interrelated acts. Through their classroom practices, some teachers are demonstrating that they understand this. One mathematics teacher in an Adventist academy gives assignments that require his students to provide written explanations. He recognizes that students grasp the concepts involved more easily after they have written them out. One can only hope that there are many others like him in Adventist classrooms who use writing to promote learning.

### **Enhancing Critical Thinking Through Writing**

Good writing assignments can and should help students to think logically, to recognize relationships among ideas, and to synthesize thought. Once teachers grasp the value of writing in this context, they will make a commitment to helping students extend their capacity to think and reason.

Writing is a complex developmental process. At every stage of writing development students need reinforcement. Britton and others have noted that students' writing competence declines, no matter how well it is developed in English courses, if adequate opportunities do not exist for them to practice writing in other subjects. Students must write in *every* course; this gives them the opportunity for growth throughout the curriculum.

---

## **The goal of writing is to communicate effectively and efficiently.**

---

### **Planning for Writing**

Teachers must create writing opportunities—students will not usually choose to write unless they are required to do so. Students tend to compartmentalize learning. They do writing in English class, algebra in algebra class, and biology in biology class. Writing, for them, is a discrete operation done for English teachers.

But, in fact, neither writing nor learn-

ing itself is discrete. Subjects complement one another. Teachers who have insights into the interrelationships among fields of knowledge must help students make the connections through writing. Only in this way will their writing development receive constant reinforcement.

### **How to Involve Teachers**

The drive to make writing pervasive throughout the curriculum may be hindered, not by students' misconceptions, but by lack of cooperation from teachers themselves. Even though they may be convinced of the exigency of the program, they may be reluctant to participate. Howard has observed that many of today's teachers studied at a time when writing was a "fast-diminishing necessity"; as a result, they have

only a "limited competence" as writers and no "feel" for the written word.<sup>7</sup> They therefore become belligerent when the program is introduced simply because they do not trust their own abilities.

Many of these reluctant teachers equate writing with grammatical correctness. If they are uncertain of their own grammar skills, they naturally will be hesitant to correct students' errors. An inordinate preoccupation with correctness may keep these teachers from making any writing assignments.

Educational leaders must recognize and address the problem of limited writing competence among teachers, because it impedes the progress of writing across the curriculum. Two major steps can be taken to eliminate the roadblock. First, offer writing workshops for all teachers throughout the system. Workshops can be given on in-service days, during the summer, and at teacher conferences.

---

## **Writing helps students work through information to arrive at "new knowledge."**

---

### **Teaching Teachers to Write**

Second, offer teachers on-site writing courses for credit. These courses should emphasize writing as a process and show clearly how a writer works. Everyone who would teach writing responsibly must develop an understanding of how writing skills are developed.

Such courses should teach the evaluation of writing and assessment of students' writing progress. Teachers must come to see writing as more than an aggregation of skills and adherence to

"correct" English. Correctness is indeed important, but of more value is quality of thought, organization of ideas, and originality.

Above all, teachers must write. This should be a key activity in both the workshops and the writing courses. The National Writing Project, which began as the Bay Area Writing Project in California, has revitalized writing instruction for teachers. The project has demonstrated that when teachers practice writing and understand the process, writing becomes something that they are eager to share with their students. As they gain confidence in themselves as writers, teachers become enthusiastic about helping their students learn to write.

A comprehensive program of writing across the curriculum provides "a climate in which good writing will thrive as a matter of course and not a luxury."<sup>8</sup> Having every teacher fully appreciate the importance of writing in the curricu-

*Continued on page 47*

Siegel, S. B. Sorenson, A. B. Forsythe, and C. A. Telles, "Sexual Assault and Mental Disorder in a Community Population," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 56 (June 1988), pp. 843-850.

<sup>16</sup> T. K. Edwards, "Providing Reasons for Wanting to Live," *Phi Delta Kappan* (December 1988), pp. 296-298.

<sup>17</sup> Phi Delta Kappan Task Force on Adolescent Suicide, *Responding to Adolescent Suicide* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> M. Seibel and J. N. Murray, "Early Prevention of Adolescent Suicide," *Educational Leadership*, 45 (March 1988), pp. 45-51.

<sup>19</sup> M. Csikszentmihalyi and J. McCormack, "The Influence of Teachers," *Phi Delta Kappan* (February 1986), p. 417.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> B. B. Collins, S. Bowden, M. Patterson, J. Snyder, S. Sandall, and P. Wellman, "After the Shooting Stops," *Journal of Counseling Development*, 65 (March 1987), pp. 389, 390.

<sup>22</sup> Phi Delta Kappan Task Force, *Responding to Adolescent Suicide*.

<sup>23</sup> J. Sorenson, "Responding to Student or Teacher Death: Preplanning Crisis Intervention," *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 67 (March 1989), pp. 426-442.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> From The New King James Version. Copyright© 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers.

## BUILDING FAITH IN THE COLLEGE RELIGION CLASS

*Continued from page 29*

naturally to spiritual sharing.

As we have noted, Western cultures privatize religion. Our youth need to recognize this cultural prohibition. Through skillful teaching and the infusion of the Spirit, they will overcome this prohibition to witnessing.

Not until the goal of outreach becomes paramount in Bible classes will our students achieve God's ultimate purpose for their lives. We fall short if our Bible classes become mired in urbane theoretical discussions of theological and ethical questions. We must inspire our students to translate inner commitment into a shared faith that commends itself to unbelievers and nominal Christians.

As we seek to accomplish this goal, our Bible classes will become what God really intends them to be—centers where faith is deepened and from which students depart with a sense of urgency to share their joy in Christ. □

---

*Dr. George W. Reid is Director of the Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Silver Spring, Maryland. Before assuming his position at BRI, Dr. Reid taught at Southwestern Adventist College, Keene, Texas, and served as Associate Editor of the Adventist Review.*

## WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: THE ACCENT IS ON LEARNING

*Continued from page 33*

lum, will ensure an educational environment in which good writing is valued. Correctness will follow as everyone becomes engaged in creating meaning and enhancing learning through writing. □

---

*Dr. Judith Nembhard is Instructional Supervisor of English, District of Columbia Public Schools. She has taught English at the high school level, as well as at Howard University, Washington, D.C., and at Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland.*

### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Donald Murray, "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning," *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland, eds. (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> See James Britton et al., *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> James Howard, "Recognizing Writing as the Key to Learning," *Education Week* (September 5, 1984), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Communication*, 28 (May 1977), pp. 122-128.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Weiss, "Writing in the Total Curriculum: A Program of Cross-Disciplinary Cooperation," *Eight Approaches to the Training of Composition*, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> See Elsa Walsh and Barbara Vobejda, "American Schools Fighting Back," *Washington Post* (September 20, 1984), p. B1, col. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Howard, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Weiss, p. 138.

## A NO-PAPER DAY

*Continued from page 36*

the year, and to make exciting or silly word lists that include proper use of suffixes or prefixes. I say the words and let the children write opposites or homonyms on their lapboards. We also use the boards to identify root words, singular or plural words, and to practice using *a* or *an* properly. (As you can tell, I love those small boards!)

**Science:** On no-paper day, we do a lot of outdoor and extra-credit activities for science. We are always growing, recording, and researching something in the classroom. We have a creek, trees, and a forest behind the school where we do

bark rubbings and water sampling. At schools where there was less outdoor space available we've used the front lawn of the school. We lie on our backs and study cloud formations, and catch grasshoppers or others of God's creatures to study and examine. We often use a microscope to examine the things we find.

**Social Studies:** Like science, social studies lends itself nicely to a no-paper day. Whatever the topic, something fun can be planned that does not involve paper. Occasionally, this produces more excitement than we had anticipated. When we made papier-mâché whales, a dog came into the room and ran off with one of them!

We've had great fun using compass directions to make up our own games. I ask, "If it is afternoon and you are facing toward the front of the classroom, which way is west?" The children love this game. (I have to be careful that I know the correct direction!)

I've chosen Thursday as my no-paper day. I even have a name for it—"Thrilling Thursday." Although no-paper day is fun, it is more than that. It develops skills students need. Often, because of the noise and unstructured nature of certain activities, we neglect to teach these skills. It's so much easier to keep children busy with paper and workbooks.

No-paper day gives me some breathing space. It gives me time to plan other activities for the coming week. For a little while, at least, it relieves me of the mountain of papers that always seems to be waiting for me. It's a day to rejuvenate my own enthusiasm for teaching and a time to get to know my students better as we share and create.

Even if you don't devote a whole day to no-paper, try it, I'm sure you'll like it. □

---

*Karen Nuessle teaches grades 1-3 at the Kit-sap Adventist School in Bremerton, Washington.*

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Continued from page 36*

understand for high school or college students also. Knight's use of illustrative stories clearly explains some very complex theological concepts.

This would be a helpful book for Bible teachers and their students. In fact, I feel everyone should read *My Gripe With God*. I'm looking forward to the sequel, which will deal with what God is willing to do in those who have accepted His offer of grace.

—Dunbar Henri.

---

*Dunbar Henri teaches Bible at Takoma Academy, Takoma Park, Maryland.*