



Considering International Baccalaureate English

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Needed: Teacher–Writers

After reading about poor Page in Mara Casey and Stephen Hemenway’s article “Structure and Freedom: Achieving a Balanced Writing Curriculum” (*EJ*, July 2001), I was horrified. Page was an enthusiastic writer in third grade, and by senior year wrote just enough to pass. How could such a tragedy happen? What sort of instruction in writing did she receive?

Tragically, many English/language arts teachers don’t feel comfortable writing, don’t write anything but grocery lists on their own, and, typically, had terrible experiences writing in school. Now they assign as little writing as they can get away with. When they do assign something, it will be a five-paragraph essay if they’re going to have to attach a grade. This form is familiar to them, since they used it all through school and in college. They never assign poems, plays, or stories because they don’t write any, nor do they know how to grade them.

When I accepted student teachers, none had been given instruction in how to teach writing. I had to teach them in the short eight weeks of their assignment. That really isn’t much time to absorb such a large body of material. I wrote up instructions on how to teach poems, plays, and stories for them. But why weren’t they taught these critical concepts at the university, where they could spend more than eight weeks learning and practicing?

When someone says *English* in a university setting, they mean *literature*. Writing is something used to comment on that literature. Any other kind of writing is labeled creative, which turns out to be a pejorative term in those circles. If you don’t think so, ask your literature professor if you can submit a poem or story instead of an essay in the next assignment.

To be fair, literature profs are comfortable with the kind of writing they engage in. They have written their dissertations and continue to write articles and perhaps books, so they know how to arrange arguments and make points based on evidence. They just don’t see it as their task to teach their students how to write anything.

So, we end up with teachers who haven’t been given instruction in how to teach writing and who don’t like to write themselves. I’ve heard a few English teachers state that they can still teach writing, even though they don’t like the subject. They’re correct, of course, in a gross sense. I can teach math, too, but I don’t enjoy it and wouldn’t do a good job

of it. At least my students would never develop any enthusiasm for the subject based on my reactions.

Unless English/language arts teachers write themselves, I don’t see how this tragedy that happened to Page won’t happen to other students. Writing advice will be given out that doesn’t work, except in some textbook. Students won’t be given feedback because the teacher won’t know what to say. Writing will be taught as I’d teach math—without enthusiasm and as infrequently as possible. Writing teachers in elementary and secondary school need to be specialists, with special knowledge of the composing process, and mainly with a love for writing. I leave unstated the obvious fact that if you love writing, you actually do some yourself.

It’s a shame that Page never ran into a writer on her journey through school. But, the odds were not in her favor that she would.

Larry DeBlois
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While I was heartened to read Joseph Jones’s criticism of the Advanced Placement English examinations in the September 2001 issue of *English Journal*, I feel the article does not go far enough in describing the failings of the exams or in offering alternatives. Although for six years I have taught a course leading to the AP Literature and Composition Examination, I reached the decision at the end of last year that I will not teach it again. The exam’s essay section devalues reflection and the writing process and in so doing encourages glib responses to quite difficult prompts. And that multiple choice section! Seeing literary interpretation reduced to multiple choice questions is worse than risible.

Jones’s plea to the ETS and the AP committee to include portfolio assessment certainly is laudable, but considering the revenue-generating concerns of ETS, does he really expect a thoughtful form of assessment, following the tenets of good practice, to be adopted? I certainly don’t, based on the AP exams’ current structure and their long, unchanging history. Furthermore, without providing the foundation of a curriculum, AP would have great difficulty including coursework as part of assessment.

Somehow I can't see AP teachers leading the revolt to change the composition of the exams. After all, doesn't the attraction to the AP stem not from a belief in the value of the exam but from the "privilege" of teaching the best and brightest students—no matter that the examination is pedagogically unsound, or that in the absence of a curriculum and in the face of a quick-response type of exam we must teach to the test if we want our students to do well?

Rest assured there is a solid alternative out there. I have been teaching International Baccalaureate English A1 (Higher Level) for the same amount of time I've been teaching AP. This two-year course features depth and breadth, various forms of assessment, and a defined but flexible syllabus that embraces a clearly stated philosophy. The exam at the end of the course is four hours long, split over two days, and includes only two papers. There is a rigorous and vibrant oral component that runs through the two years. And coursework leads to the writing of two major papers assessed externally.

Over the years, I have noted a stark difference in the attitude of students in AP and IB classes. AP students tend to want to know only how to do well on the exams, their desire to understand literature and writing sadly wanting. In IB classes *understanding* is the priority of most students, and their work habits, the culture of learning established, and overall performance have convinced me that IB is the way to go. Most US colleges and universities now accept high scores in the IB Higher Level course as the equivalent of high scores on the AP English exams in determining English credit or advanced placement.

I should add that the IB English classes I teach always have a wider mix of ability levels and ethnic diversity than the AP classes. One might think they would be more difficult to manage. The reality is they are a dream to teach because students are invested in a program that is not only highly demanding but also meaningful and rich.

I urge colleagues and schools teaching AP to take a look at the IB. AP pales in comparison.

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Cartoon Comment

I am a future teacher who considers the *English Journal* an invaluable resource on teaching pedagogy and the real-world tales of working teachers. My regard for your publication, however, took a nosedive when I came across the cartoon about President Bush in the September 2001 issue. This extremely tasteless, crudely drawn attack on the president's Texas testing program was mean-spirited and one-sided—two things I don't expect from *English Journal*. The cartoon simply reinforces the knee-jerk impression of many of his liberal detractors that Bush is unintelligent and undeserving of his post. It also criticizes Bush's manner of speech in an exaggerated way that smacks of elitism. Does The National Council of Teachers of English condone such a cheap shot against our president? Am I to infer, then, that NCTE opposes George Bush?

The president's emphasis on increased testing is, indeed, cause for concern, but he is proposing an unprecedented increase in federal education spending that far exceeds anything his predecessor sought in eight years in office. And Bill Clinton was hailed as The Education President! Such a childish cheap shot on Bush is particularly offensive in light of the recent terrorist attacks and his leadership in bringing the country together. Your cartoon serves only to underscore the political differences that continue to divide America and undermine the education community. [Note: The September issue was published weeks before the September 11 attacks.—Ed.]

As I prepare to enter the classroom, one of my biggest fears is that I will be expected to conform to a particular political agenda dictated by the teachers union or the administration. I have strived to keep politics out of my professional life, and I think teachers would be well-served to do the same. Your September cartoon merely reinforces my fear that teachers are "supposed to side with the liberals" and oppose George Bush, a suggestion that I resent.

If this was your attempt at humor, it was a terrible misjudgment. Shame on the NCTE for perpetuating this divisiveness, and shame on the staff of the *English Journal* for allowing such a distasteful cartoon to appear in print.

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