IMPLICATIONS OF
Research in Written Composition
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Everyone here today is, I assume, familiar with the circumstances that led the Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1960 to set up an ad hoc Committee on the State of Knowledge about Composition. If you are not, then certainly you must at least be aware of the increasingly vocal public complaint that has been leveled at the writing of American students for the past ten years. It is this widespread criticism that has led individual teachers to reexamine their methods of teaching composition and in their resulting perplexity to turn to the Council for help. Part of the answer to this plea is the committee’s report whose implications I have been asked to discuss today.

If you are concerned with the preparation of teachers of English in any way and have not yet read the committee’s report, Research in Written Composition, especially Chapter III (which some of you received as a reprint in your convention packets at San Francisco), then I submit that you have no right to talk to your people on the subject of teaching composition until you do.

When this committee was constituted in answer to the popular hue and cry about the condition of student writing—indeed, all writing—in the United States in our time, some of us, as I recall, comfortably concluded that our search would uncover a plentiful supply of authoritative evidence to support our opinions, justify our methods, and confound our critics.

Concerned over the nature of public pronouncements about how writing should be taught—the sound and the wild seem to share space equally in the press—the Executive Committee appointed an ad hoc Committee on the State of Knowledge about Composition to review what is known and what is not known about the teaching and learning of composition and the conditions under which it is taught, for the purpose of preparing for publication a special scientifically based report on what is known in this area.1

We had not gone far in the examination of available research in this area of English teaching before disillusion set in!

In our charge from the Executive Committee of the Council we were asked to review and evaluate all research on the subject of composition and to submit at least a preliminary report within a period of about six months. Under the chairmanship of Richard Braddock we set to work with a will. But by the time we had identified 485 studies as relevant out of the more than 1,000 which we uncovered in our initial search, the deadline—like most normal and well-behaved deadlines—had faded, and the report appeared finally two years later, in 1963.

At its organization meeting in Washington in April, 1961, during the CCCC conference, the members of the committee agreed:


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from among other things, to limit its task to written composition and, more particularly, to studies in which some actual writing was involved (not studies entirely restricted to objective testing and questionnaires). The committee further decided to use only research employing "scientific methods," like controlled experimentation and textual analysis. At the suggestion of the Executive Committee, the ad hoc committee set as its goal the identification of the dozen or so most soundly based studies of the foregoing type."

From several well-informed people that I questioned in a somewhat superficial way after receiving this assignment, I have obtained mixed reactions, ranging from "a very good report" to "the most depressing report ever." In between were the others, registering shock of less or greater intensity.

For looked at in one way, the findings reported by the committee, not on the state of our knowledge, but in effect on the state of our unknowledge about this currently sensitive area, are indeed rather shocking. Anyone who has digested the report and who respects the integrity of the committee must surely hesitate at this time to make any strong assertions about the teaching of composition, unless of course he puts stock in professional superstition or believes himself strongly endowed with "informed intuition." (While unanimously rejecting the former, of course, most of us probably do feel that we possess some degree of the latter!)

But if Research in Written Composition offers us a dismal picture of the state of our naiveté in the matter of teaching written composition, it also does, however, a number of other important things remarkably well. There is not time here to inquire into the English teacher's traditional resistance to what is popularly called "scientific method," except to note in passing that we have scant reason to question the philosophers who through the centuries have been reminding us that wisdom is born of the recognition of one's ignorance.

Where the teaching of composition is concerned, the report suggests that this is almost precisely the stage we are at. Thus we are ready to learn, and in Chapter III the report reviews what might be labeled the "half-knowledge" that is available to us from a number of studies which are grouped under the general headings: "Environmental Factors," "Institutional Factors," and "Rhetorical Considerations." The report then lists twenty-three basic areas of concern for the teacher of written composition that are largely untouched by research of any kind or quality, important guidelines, as it were, for those who in the future engage in research in this most important area of our professional concern.

This is not, however, the only important help contained in this report. For the committee in its work of reviewing research studies dealing with aspects of composition became increasingly aware that most of the studies and projects of the past had failed for a combination of identifiable reasons. To begin with, many of the investigators were little more than amateurs, harried candidates for higher degrees who had neither the time, the necessary training in research techniques, nor the adequate resources to carry on carefully planned and controlled studies. Though some of the more professional and elaborate studies demonstrated appreciation of the basic requirements of sound research, even here

\[2\] Ibid.
the investigators failed to achieve the control of variables, the research design, the objectivity that are considered more or less standard in comparable scientific and industrial research.

Concluding that little is likely to be added to our knowledge of the composition process if future investigators continue to repeat the mistakes and omissions of the past, the committee decided that one of its important functions must be to provide descriptions of the several research techniques that are applicable in studies of this kind. In the long run, this may well prove to be the committee’s most valuable work, for the information and suggestions offered here to investigators in the area of composition are just as useful to investigators in other areas of English teaching—not impossibly for the whole field of education inquiry. Indeed, one might reasonably ask what the results of comparable studies in other areas of our profession might disclose.

Earlier this week, at a meeting in New York of representatives of the American Book Publishers Council and the American Textbook Publishers Institute with those of the NCTE, during which the state of research in English was given considerable attention, our past president, David Russell, suggested in a summary statement that we have perhaps reached the point where research projects carried on by individuals are no longer adequate to our needs, that the time has come for massive, coordinated attacks upon the central problems of teaching and learning English. Certainly we must all agree that the problem of teaching students to compose competently in English is one of the basic problems worrying our schools and colleges today.

In conclusion, I feel compelled to inject a personal query that I am certain is shared by other teachers of English. And I ask it aware of the rhetorical significance of a “misplaced” preface. Is “scientifically controlled research” in its usual sense possible in the discipline of “English”? Or more specifically, for our present purposes, is such research possible in the area of composition with all of its built-in variables and nonobjective factors?

And I answer myself: “Because we don’t get 100 percent compositions in the classroom is no reason to stop assigning the writing of compositions. Our aim must be to improve research in English to the highest possible level, even as we recognize that we probably can never attain the degree of precision dreamed about. Even generalizations based on sound evidence can be extremely useful in determining the more effective ways to teach our subject.”

I have come personally to the conclusion, largely as a result of my work with this committee, that “informed intuition”—in which I have always put my chief faith—is only possible when it is informed. And sound research in one important source of knowledge.

We have been so long in discovering what we don’t know about the teaching of composition, and now we have so much to learn, that I am inevitably reminded of Chaucer’s wry observation on his related problem, “The Lyf so shorte, the craft so long to lerne.”