Is It Time to Abandon the Idea of "Best Practices" in the Teaching of English?

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Many teachers are searching for that "silver bullet": the teaching method that always works. And many answers, often contradictory, are offered by educators far and wide, as evidenced by the 768,000 websites identified by a Google search for "best practices teaching." The quest for best practices has led many to seek ways to teach that defy even the most challenging situations and obstinate students. It has also led to some raucous disagreements among classroom teachers in faculty rooms, among academics in their journals and conference rooms, and among people in communities who have opinions about education. At one point I felt that some practices were inherently better than others. My personal journey through the profession, however, has brought me in contact with much that has changed my thinking about what makes a teaching practice work and what methods work best. Perhaps my personal narrative of developing a more complex understanding of effective teaching will resonate with *EJ* readers.

Structured Process and Individualized Teaching Approaches

After graduating from Kenyon College with a degree in English literature in 1974, I found myself unsure about what to do with myself. (Back then, actually having a career plan while still in college was considered to be a bit crass.) To help pay the bills, I spent a few years as a substitute teacher and hall monitor in and around Trenton, New Jersey, and these experiences somehow convinced me that I wanted to become a teacher. Toward that end I got accepted into the Master of Arts in Teaching program at the University of Chicago, which I began in 1976. During the year I spent at Chicago, I taught in the Pilot Enrichment/Upward Bound program in Hyde Park and did my student teaching at Martin Luther King High School on Chicago's South Side, and then got my first full-time teaching job in 1977 in Westmont, Illinois. Between 1977 and 1990, I taught in Westmont, Barrington, and Oak Park-River Forest High Schools, all in Chicago suburbs, giving me quite a range of settings for my teaching—especially if you throw in 1983–84 when I was a full-time doctoral student and substitute taught in about 25 different Chicago public schools to help pay the rent.

At the University of Chicago I learned what Arthur Applebee has called a *structured process* approach to teaching ("Problems"; see, e.g., Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, and McCann, in press). My mentor in learning this method of instruction was George Hillocks Jr. In this method the teacher does a lot of work *outside class* to (1) identify the themes that guide students' inquiries and (2) design and sequence activities that help structure their learning. *In class,* however, the students do most of the work as they go through the goal-directed, task-oriented activities, often in small groups.

The classroom is highly social and interactive and allows students to explore and play with ideas and language as they consider problems built into the activities and related to unit themes (see, e.g., Ragsdale and Smagorinsky). The themes typically involve students in inquiry into questions that, for one reason or another, engage them with compelling problems. Students, for instance, might define

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a complex concept (e.g., success, courageous action, progress) and think about the actions of both real and literary characters relative to the criteria of the definition. They typically think about how they would engage with life challenges in light of their reflection on the issues under consideration. (Outlines for instruction following this method are posted at http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/Virtual Library/Unit_Outlines.htm.)

The teacher is thus concerned with creating an environment that helps to promote and structure students' learning toward clear goals related to unit concepts. (Hillocks's original name for this approach was "environmental" teaching [*Research*], a name that never quite caught on.) Student activity within this structure typically involves discussion of either texts or things, such as news stories on a particular topic or a collection of seashells. Through their interactions they inductively develop processes for how to treat similar types of problems of increasing complexity. Students might, for example, take on the question of what defines "success" in life. To do so, they would initially learn to define concepts by considering a familiar question, such as what qualities define a good breakfast cereal or specific kind of musical performance. With procedures established for how to define a contested concept, they could consider a set of problematic examples of people's life accomplishments to generate criteria for what constitutes "success" in life. From there they could read a sequence of literary works, perhaps leading up to *The Great Gatsby, Death of a Salesman,* or other work that treats the quality of one's life trajectory. Through their reading and discussion, students could use their definitions to refine their understanding of success, revise their definitions, and consider how they could live their lives to meet the understanding of success that they have developed.

My personal journey through the profession, however, has brought me in contact with much that has changed my thinking about what makes a teaching practice work and what methods work best.

Hillocks's approach employs a form of instructional scaffolding that is task-based and discussion-driven. It is designed to enable students to work toward independent performance on new tasks that employ the strategies and procedures learned through peer interaction on prior, less-complex tasks. My orientation to teaching, then, stressed both social factors and individual students' ultimate appropriation of what they had learned through social interaction. To paraphrase my friend Michael W. Smith's personal observation regarding this approach: People don't learn to write just by writing; rather, they learn to write by talking throughout the process of writing so that their thinking about what they write is continually critiqued and reinforced as it develops.

This view of teaching was at odds with the two other major approaches to teaching that were practiced at the time and that remain in currency. The method that was most popular among academics valorized the individual, as outlined in such best-selling books as Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents* and Susan J. Tchudi and Steven N. Tchudi's *The English/Language Arts Handbook: Classroom Strategies for Teachers.* Atwell's remarks are revealing in terms of this philosophy: "I mostly teach individuals, moving within the group to stop and confer with one writer or reader at a time. Because kids are writing on topics they've chosen and reading books they've selected, my teaching and their learning are about as individualized as they can get" (45). In the workshop, "Each day writers will have a sustained chunk of time to go their own ways, writing and conferring; each day we'll come back together again at the workshop's end" (86). The classroom, then, served as a gathering place for individuals to work on their projects and then report to the group on their efforts. This approach to teaching, its proponents argue, helps to unleash each child's natural developmental pace and trajectory free of teacher agendas and interference, a belief that I see rooted in the Romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see, e.g., *Emile: or, On Education*).

Disputes about Best Practice

Eight years into my secondary school teaching career, I began my doctoral studies, again under the mentorship of Hillocks. I realized that I needed to resolve the tension I felt in balancing attention to what people think *individually* as they work and how that thinking proceeds in relation to the *social context* in which it takes place. I was spurred in this effort by what struck me as a paradox in Hillocks's claims about effective teaching (*Research*). In his comprehensive review of writing research conducted between 1963 and 1983, he used statistical comparisons of research and concluded that the approach he had taught me and many others had greater effects on students' writing than any other method. Based on this finding, he made a "best practice" claim on behalf of the structured-process or environmental approach to teaching I have described.

And yet many teachers in the field, voting with their wallets, were making Atwell's individualized approach the clear favorite and, by my informal count, the most widely referenced pedagogy in *English Journal* articles. If one approach worked best and another was more widely practiced (or at least read about), something had to give. Interrogating this seeming paradox struck me as critically important as I tried to make sense of my field during my doctoral studies and subsequent career.

My reading of Lev S. Vygotsky and his modern interpreters helped me to understand this conundrum. Hillocks's attention to the environment focused on students' work in social activities designed and put into motion by teachers. What was missing from his formulation, however, was a consideration of the degree to which any teacher might embrace this pedagogy or have the capacity to design and implement activities in the labor-intensive manner described by Hillocks and his students (e.g., Hillocks, *Narrative, Teaching;* Hillocks, McCabe, and McCampbell; Lee; McCann et al.; Smagorinsky, *Teaching English by Design*). Further, his approach did not initially take into account the broader context of teaching that might or might not support the sort of process-oriented, and thus time-consuming, instruction he advocated. Ironically, then, while the social environment of students' learning was central to his approach, the social context of *teachers'* lives and work was given less attention. Although Hillocks later analyzed the testing environment that shapes writing instruction (*Testing*), his earlier work could not account for the fact that what emerged as a "best practice" in his teaching and research was not widely practiced by the majority of teachers, including those with choice in the matter.

Indeed, it's likely that what Hillocks identified as the "best practice" in teaching writing was, at best, the third most widely used approach to teaching writing. The default means of teaching writing was what he termed "presentational" teaching: a teacher positioned at the front of the room and taking an authoritative role in dispensing knowledge. Such teachers typically use model essays, often consisting of five paragraphs, to reveal to students the end-product of their efforts, focusing on this final form and attending less to the processes involved in producing it. This product-oriented approach was (and remains) well-established in textbooks, was familiar to teachers through their experiences as students, was entrenched in many high-stakes writing assessments, and was otherwise well-woven into the culture of secondary school English instruction (see Johnson et al. for a review of these issues).

> **If a review of 20 years of experimental research demonstrated Hillocks's (*Research*) environmental approach to be the most effective way of teaching writing, followed by the individualistic, general process approach advocated by Atwell and others, followed with a considerable lag by a presentational approach that relied on product models, why was their actual usage in classrooms likely practiced in the reverse order?**

As a teacher both in high schools and ultimately in university teacher education programs, and as one with a great interest in this seemingly illogical situation, I faced a conundrum: If a review of 20 years of experimental research demonstrated Hillocks's (*Research*) environmental approach to be the most effective way of teaching writing, followed by the individualistic, general process approach advocated by Atwell and others, followed with a considerable lag by a presentational approach that relied on product models, why was their actual usage in classrooms likely practiced in the reverse order?

Within this broader contention, my experiences as a teacher from 1976–90 had led me to accept Hillocks's approach as what worked best for me, even in schools in which the other major approaches were available and widely practiced around me. I thus began to search for explanations that were not tied to a notion that one thing may work best on all occasions and for all purposes for all the many personalities, goals, histories, and other factors that come together in particular classrooms.

A Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspective

I again found Vygotsky to be helpful in sorting out this vexing problem. Vygotsky (*Mind,* "Thinking") is best known for his formulation of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD, however, is but the tip of the iceberg of his effort to develop a comprehensive psychology of the human mind as it develops in relation to its social, cultural, and historical contexts (see Smagorinsky, "Culture of Vygotsky," "Vygotsky"). This deeper, more complex project became central to my efforts to solve the riddle that had puzzled me about why an empirically and, for me, experientially demonstrated "best practice" was taken up with such little passion by the majority of teachers in the field, even as it got good results in my teaching, in the teaching of others who had learned to teach from Hillocks, and in Hillocks's research (*Research*).

Vygotsky was concerned with the ways in which people learn to think based on their interactions with people who surround them. Because the people with whom they interact have also learned to think in this way, it's important to understand the human mind and its processes in terms of the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it develops (Wertsch). What I found so compelling about this focus was the way in which it expanded the context of learning well beyond the walls of the classroom and the school. As an educator I could no longer conceive of teaching and learning as taking place between teachers and students. Instead, I had to consider the walls as permeable, allowing in not only the students' prior experiences in homes and communities but also the school's administrative emphasis, my colleagues' experiences as students and as teachers, the local community's values and influences, the district's and state's curriculum and assessment practices, and the national policy context including its assessment apparatus and regard for teachers and teacher educators.

These influences on teaching and learning are not merely present, however. As Faulkner famously said, "The past isn't dead; it isn't even past." If I may introduce a further convolution, the past is thus present in the present and the present is an extension and distillation of the past; both provide the basis from which the future emerges and so are present in it. This emphasis on cultural and historical factors in learning to think requires a much more careful look at how the people in a setting have come to be who they are and to think as they do. This consideration must take into account both their life experiences and their cultural backgrounds, and thus the historical means through which they have learned to see the world as they do and act accordingly within it.

This connection of individual learning to the social and cultural history of learning makes the claim of a "best practice" problematic. A Vygotskian perspective suggests that the quality of instruction is dependent on the particular people who come together to teach and learn and the qualities of whatever precedes and surrounds them in the setting of the classroom. It further suggests that learners might have developed different kinds of worldviews and ways of thinking to motivate their schoolwork and that different teachers may be more skillful with one approach than with another due to their training, their dispositions, their experiences, and other factors. As a result, what works best for me in my classroom at my school might not work so well for you in yours.

The Situated Nature of Best Practices

Attention to these factors required me to reconsider the notion that any teaching approach can be considered a "best practice" regardless of who is doing the practicing, where it's being practiced, and how that practice is experienced by all involved. I had to reflect back, then, on the fact that under Hillocks's tutelage and in the company of his community of students, I had been socialized into viewing his approach as sensible and nearly natural. His program had become to me what I've called a *conceptual home base* (Smagorinsky, *Teaching English through Principled*): the social setting to which I returned to reconfirm what I understood to be pedagogically and theoretically sound, even when (and perhaps especially when) my assumptions were disputed at the schools in which I taught, in the professional readings I undertook, or at the educational conferences I attended.

And so I began to view environmental or structured process teaching to be, rather than an absolute "best practice," an approach that I'd learned from the master and had learned to believe in through successful applications and extensions. Meanwhile, many people with whom I taught had been socialized into accepting other sets of premises. One of the schools in which I taught was described by many as "traditional," with a number of my colleagues practicing form-oriented teaching according to a presentational process. My colleagues were skillful with this method, the students (from an array of social classes) performed well on standardized tests, and roughly 80% of graduates went on to some form of higher education, and so the faculty sensibly concluded that their teaching methods were effective. My department chair even told me that innovations—in the case that prompted this conversation, the possibility of developing a writing lab in the 1980s—were for other districts that needed some sort of gimmick to stand out. But not for us: We were the aspirant institution toward which they strived. What's more, my colleagues were rewarded for their form- and content-oriented instruction in this setting with glowing annual evaluations of their teaching and with job security, including tenure and sabbaticals. If they had been taught through presentations of model essays during their student days and had been successful in high school and college, and now taught through presentations of model essays and were evaluated as successful teachers, who was I to tell them otherwise?

At another school I taught in, I was again somewhat of an oddball, this time against a different orthodoxy. The English department had been through a series of workshops conducted by a prominent exponent of a general writing process approach, one that stressed freewriting, writing in journals, having students select their own topics and forms, and in general setting their own learning goals and pursuing them at their pace—the individualized approach advocated by Atwell and others. The department chair himself had been a graduate student under the mentorship of this workshop leader and valued greatly her opinion, perspective, and beliefs about writing, all of which she had published in prominent books and journals. The local culture of this department, then, supported this approach to teaching and rewarded it with positive annual evaluations. And the students, largely from affluent backgrounds, thrived, or at least produced more interesting writing and won more writing awards than they had before the consultant's intervention with the faculty.

As had happened at the other teaching site, a culture formed that valued a particular teaching approach that was peripheral to my repertoire, even if I did experiment with some of its methods. Once again, this pedagogy produced results in this context that were sufficiently impressive that I was in no position to point to the results of a meta-analysis of experimental research to dispute them and say that a better practice was available, if only they would learn it.

The university program and the English departments in which I taught served as important cultural institutions, but hardly the only ones that influenced my thinking about teaching. In the affluent community in which I taught, for instance, one of my students' parents ran for the school board. He was a real estate developer and ran on the platform that the district needed to maintain *the appearance of high educational standards* to keep real estate values high. He won in a landslide. Tied to his campaign was the belief that high standardized test scores provide the best and most visible way of maintaining the appearance of educational quality, thus requiring increased dedication of instructional time to test preparation and mitigating the urgency for process-oriented instruction. In this instance, the local culture of the English department was at odds with the broader culture of the community and of other academic departments, resulting in mixed missions and *instructus interruptus* when testing materials were dropped in our laps on short notice.

At the more traditional school, the district had established grading periods of six weeks, rather than the nine weeks used in most U.S. districts, resulting in three grading periods in each of the year's two semesters. The rationale was that students would be "on their toes" more if final grades were assigned more frequently. This rationale fit well with the school's traditional orientation because it emphasized the delivery of content and products, rather than attention to the learning processes that facilitated content knowledge and provided students with the means through which they might achieve these ends. Here, the deeply entrenched values of a staid community produced teaching methods with a good four millennia of established practice (see Cole at http://lchc.ucsd.edu/People/MCole/humdev.pdf [page 202] for a photograph of a teacher-centered Sumerian classroom circa 2,000 B.C.E.). They further suggested the value of curricular devices (e.g., six-week marking periods) that presumed the validity of traditional teaching methods and structured teachers' and students' deadlines so that they were supported and encouraged.

What, Then, of Best Practices?

What, then, of the "silver bullet"—the teaching method that works best regardless of setting? At this point I must consider the likelihood that there is no one best practice, even as my friends and I continue to write about the methods that we learned and built on through our studies and long relationship with Hillocks. For the right teacher in the right situation, we believe that these methods can produce some pretty powerful teaching; we still get enthusiastic responses when we present our ideas and materials, so something must be working. And yet the NCTE Annual Convention rooms are filled with sessions promoting other methods, so NCTE's diverse constituents are seeing their instructional needs met in many different ways.

What, then, of the "silver bullet"—the teaching method that works best regardless of setting?

Even with this ecumenical approach, I don't find a wide-open "to each his or her own" solution to be entirely satisfying. I've daydreamed through many a lecture in my day, and so I can't agree that just because a teacher is comfortable lecturing, it's the right method for the setting (or, at least, a setting that includes me). I also can't say that because a research study demonstrates something's effectiveness, it's automatically worth doing to the exclusion of all else, although it may be worth trying. Of course I was happy to know that Hillocks's meta-analysis of experimental studies found the environmental or structured-process approach to be the most effective method of improving students' writing. But rather than ending the discussion, his results produced a new wave of dispute, especially from those who found that the individualized, "natural process" methods that he questioned worked well in their classrooms.

Perhaps the current corollary to that dispute concerns the ways in which the federal No Child Left Behind Act has instituted research-based teaching methods as the "best practice" for improving reading test scores. And the research base upon which they draw is limited to only one method, the experimental design that uses statistical tests of significance to determine an experimental group's degree of effectiveness. But many question the idea that reading scores are the best indicators of reading improvement, that reading "understanding" or "comprehension" is precisely definable or measurable in any way, that experimental designs are the best and only research method available to identify effective teaching practices, that scripted lessons designed to raise test scores comprise good teaching, or that good teachers would want to remain in a profession in which their good judgment is trumped by the imperative to stick to the script that someone else has written to guide their teaching. I think that the splendid teaching narratives provided by Cynthia Ballenger, Karen Gallas, Karen Hale Hankins, Greg Michie, and many others reveal that quality teaching requires a greater sensitivity to students than any scripted lessons can afford.

But Really, What of Best Practices?

I have found this essay to be difficult to conclude. I'd like to close with a snappy solution that teachers can use on Monday, but abandoning the universal idea of a best practice makes that impossible. Ultimately, I think that the best resolution to the question of what constitutes a "best practice" is to shift the terms to what Arthur Applebee calls *principled practice* ("Musings"). Teaching through principled practice challenges teachers to think about what is appropriate given the unique intersection that their classroom provides for their many and varied students; their beliefs about teaching and learning; the materials available for them to use; and the public, professional, and policy contexts in which they teach. The notion of principled practice focuses on the *why* of teaching: why teaching methods work in particular ways in particular settings.

Taking this approach invests a great deal of authority and responsibility in the teacher. A scripted curriculum, a centralized orthodoxy, or an abdication of judgment is not amenable to a principled practice approach. Teaching through principled practice might foreground different values—care for students' emotional needs in one setting, attention to home and community literacies in another, adherence to conventional literacies in another—depending on what a teacher's principled assessment of the situation produces. It might attend primarily to local values or might result in a challenge to local values. Above all it should be *informed*: about available pedagogies, about students both generally and particularly, about community and administrative values and priorities, and about how to make wise and prudent decisions within the contested political environment of schooling.

Inevitably, such an approach involves *reflective practice,* a term Hillocks (*Teaching*) borrows from Donald Schön and many others. Through reflective practice a teacher continually considers the effects of instruction on students' learning, or on whatever other outcomes might be produced through a teaching and learning relationship. The focus might be on teaching methods, as Hillocks urges in promoting the idea of *frame experiments*: teachers' studies of what students learn based on how they are taught. Evidence of quality teaching might come through the products of students' work, through evidence of greater engagement (e.g., the number of students who participate in activities and discussions), or through the presence of other qualities that the teacher hopes will follow from a particular instructional approach.

Other reflective practitioners have sought to change the quality of *classroom relationships,* as when Sarah Freedman et al. introduced multicultural themes into urban classrooms to force simmering issues out into the open. Evidence of change came through the teachers' systematic observations of how such topics altered classroom dynamics with respect to who contributed, what sort of emotional timbre followed, which issues emerged, and so on.

Undoubtedly there are additional ways in which teachers may reflect on their own practice. I see principled, reflective practice as a way to increase the likelihood that an effective practice—although not necessarily "the best" practice—will be employed for further reflection and reconsideration. Taking this approach involves, I think, a teacher's continual involvement in some sort of professional growth through reading and discussion, and so keeps a teacher in touch with what's possible as students, fields, communities, and other factors change over time. It further involves teachers in paying attention to how their students experience their classrooms. And so a principled, reflective practitioner who employs lectures might learn that students are not paying attention, or that they can repeat information from books and notes but not think constructively when presented with new material.

I'd like to close with a snappy solution that teachers can use on Monday, but abandoning the universal idea of a best practice makes that impossible.

When instruction is tied to principled, reflective practice, "anything goes" becomes untenable: Things only "go" if they work according to the teacher's thoughtful standard of learning or other desired result. Best practices then are comprised of the methods that a teacher determines, through principled reflection on how instruction works, to be effective in his or her unique setting. This notion is not tied to any specific pedagogy but rather to the teacher's informed, verified judgment of what students need and how to provide it instructionally. These judgments needn't be published like those of Gallas and others, although I wish that more were publicly available. The product of such teaching comes through the benefits afforded to each new classroom of students that benefits from the experiences of the last.

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