

Donald Graves has achieved wide recognition for propounding a method for teaching elementary students how to write that stresses unstructured expression of personal experiences. He uses his case study of sixteen New Hampshire children as a research base providing proof of the efficacy of this method. However, his observations from this study qualify as reportage more than research. The work of the Graves team in New Hampshire represents a demonstration of teaching ideas that work well under favorable circumstances. Because he never considers negative evidence for the hypotheses he is testing, his work does not constitute research.

Graves Revisited

A Look at the Methods and Conclusions of the New Hampshire Study

PETER SMAGORINSKY

Oak Park and River Forest (Illinois) High School

A number of writing process researchers who have become prominent in the last decade disdain experimental research. Such studies, they say, describe the conditions and behaviors of a specific time and place, and their findings can not be extrapolated to other contexts. These critics contend that the methods of scientific inquiry are inapplicable in social situations, because people do not behave as predictably as chemicals or elements. Rather, individuals are unique, and so are the different settings in which they find themselves. The fact that a group of people responds in a particular way in one setting does not mean that we can declare their behavior to be law and generalize that other people in other situations responding to different variables will behave similarly. These critics believe that if we are to study the behavior of children in classrooms, we must find some method of inquiry other than that borrowed from experimental science.

One such researcher is Donald H. Graves of the University of New

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION, Vol. 4 No. 4, October 1987 331-342
© 1987 Sage Publications, Inc.

Hampshire. Graves claims that his major research project, a study of sixteen elementary school students in rural New Hampshire, is a form of the case study method, because of its intensive focus on a limited population. Only this type of study, he feels, can conclusively provide information about classrooms. In "A New Look at Writing Research" (1980), Graves refers to the "sad figures" that have characterized elementary school studies because of the distortions resulting from the experimental designs that had dominated educational research until the early 1970s, and declares that this older, experimental research "wasn't readable and was of limited value. It couldn't help [teachers] in the classroom. They could not see their schools, classrooms, or children in the data. *Context* had been ignored" (p. 914). He goes on to elaborate on context: the child's behavior as he or she writes, his or her interests that inspire the writing, the manner in which he or she has been taught up to the point of observation, the arrangement and tone of his or her classroom, and the interests and priorities of his or her parents, teachers, and school administrators.

Graves suggests that we abandon the traditional method of experimental inquiry as a means of studying classrooms, and, in particular, of studying students' composing processes. "We need," he says "more information on child behaviors and decisions *during* the process, rather than through speculation on child activity during writing from written products alone" (p. 915). Not merely, he says, is the teeming quality of the classroom impossible to analyze experimentally, but the phenomenon of writing itself is far too complicated a process to be broken down and analyzed by a researcher.

Graves feels that by conducting investigations based on case study methodology, researchers need not confine their observations to behaviors that they can record only according to their codability, and that relate only to the researcher's hypotheses; rather, they may observe all of the subjects' behaviors and record them in a narrative fashion that allows them to "describe in detail the full context of data gathering and the processes of learning and teaching" (p. 918). The major assumption behind this contention is that such a means of study will account fully for the educational context in which learning occurs. An examination of the research reports filed by Graves and his associates reveals, however, that they do not in fact give good account of the educational context. Their studies focus on certain students and observe them intensely, recording their behavior in a narrative string of anecdotes. Yet the researchers do not report every behavior

and thought of the child and record them categorically; instead, the data consist of the researcher's own narration of particular behaviors of the child, giving us a limited view of the whole range of behaviors the child exhibits, and leaving open the possibility that the selection of what is recorded as data might be biased by the researcher's anticipated findings.

One might argue that, rather than being researchers, Graves and his colleagues are simply excellent demonstrators of instructional techniques that work well. The great number of elementary school teachers who implement their ideas and attend their conference presentations should easily attest to the effectiveness of many of their ideas. The purpose of this article is not to dispute whether or not Graves deserves his reputation as an innovative and sensitive educator. We can, however, question his claim that the conclusions that he draws from his classroom observations serve as a research basis for his instructional ideas. What he and his followers call "research" is, I propose, instead reportage.

Let us start with a look at some of the claims that the Graves team makes in their publications. They maintain that their role as researchers is to observe, rather than control, student behavior, and to draw their conclusions about the writing process by watching and recording how young writers develop naturally. Graves (1979a, p. 78) says, "Children give us information in the way they write, solve problems, and conceive of the writing process. This information falls in an order that tells us where and how to teach. . . . We speak of letting the child lead for effective learning to take place." He further maintains that his observations of this emerging process will allow him to describe, without influencing them, children's stages of writing development.

Other evidence in the reports published by the Graves team indicate, however, that the writing of these students does not in fact develop naturally, but is highly influenced by the biases and interventions of the researchers. Although he generally maintains that a benign teaching approach is best, he also says that children "occasionally lose control of their writing and help is needed" (Graves, 1983b, p. 843). He does not specify here the point at which they lose this control; the examples he gives indicate that it comes only when a writer is blocked. However, the other published research from this project indicates that intervention occurs when the students' processes deviate from those preferred by the researchers and teachers.

One such form of intervention is for the teacher to direct students to write several "leads," or openings to pieces of writing, until the student arrives at one that the teacher finds satisfactory. For instances, in "What Children Show Us about Revision" (1979b), Graves describes the progress of Brian: "Brian's teacher was responsible for the change. Noting Brian's level of fluency, yet lack of revision, she stressed two new approaches to the writing process. One required Brian to write about a personal experience, the other to write three leads before beginning to write the main paper" (p. 315). We will examine the researchers' emphasis on personal experience writing later. For now, let us look at a typical session, reported by Calkins, in which a teacher directs students to write leads (Barrs, 1983):

A few weeks later Becky brought a carefully penned article beginning to her teacher. They read it together.

I walked up to the pond. I wanted to catch something like a catfish, or something, I went to the other side of the pond. . . . "This is a good try, Becky," Mrs. Howard said. Then, with a magic marker, she drew a dark green line under Becky's opening. "Try another beginning, O.K.?" Becky's mouth gaped open. "But, but . . ." she started to say. Mrs. Howard had moved on. Becky scowled to see her perfect, neat paper ruined by a dark slash of green. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she wrote another beginning.

I sat down on the rock. I put my hand in the water. Fish gathered around. The catfish charged at my bait. He bit it, and swam away. Becky read what she had written out loud, "It's better," she said smiling. Mrs. Howard agreed. Hugging Becky warmly, she drew another dark green line across the page. "See if you can do another one," and she cheerfully left the dismayed child to discover for herself the process professional writers experience.

Becky reread her two openings, numbering them as she finished each one. Then she slowly drew a number three.

3. I felt a tug! It was a catfish "I'm going to use this lead as my opening," Becky said to the teacher. Back at her seat, Becky shared her paper with Amy. Soon Amy was writing leads, while Becky encouragingly slashed green lines under each. The concept of leads spread quickly, as children helped each other. (pp. 834-835)

Here, the teacher has intervened until the child has exhibited "the process professional writers experience," which is clearly the optimal

writing process in the eyes of the observer both from the tone of the description and the fact that it is a form of behavior of which the teacher ultimately approves. In this case, the teacher has instructed Becky to write new leads until she arrives at the type we frequently find in Calkins's own writing, that of *in medias res*. In three of the articles she wrote for this research project, Calkins begins with this approach. Here is the way in which she opens her "Case Study of a Nine Year Old Writer" (1981):

The classroom door squeaked. The circle of third graders looked up as the visitor came into the room. "Shhh," one child said, beckoning him to join the circle. "Andrea's about to share her final draft."

Andrea smiled, then ducked her pale blue eyes behind her paper. The nine year old glanced up. "It's not very long," she apologized. "I had much more in my third draft, but . . . here's what I kept."

I snuggled deeper in the blanket. I felt uneasy. Something big was missing. Then Daddy came and lay down with me. He made a pocket with his legs and I crawled in. He patted my head. I felt happy. Nothing was missing anymore. The visitor's pleased eyes met mine. "I got here just in time," he said.

I thought of the drafts and redrafts Andrea had made over the last three weeks. He'd heard the final draft, but he'd missed the process of creating it.

"I guess we see it differently," I said to the visitor. "I'd say you got here just too late."

Through a grant from the National Institute of Education, Donald Graves, Susan Sowers and I aren't too late. On a day to day basis, we watch the writing process of eleven school aged children. (p. 240)

I would suggest that Calkins's frequent use of this form of opening indicates that she regards it as a highly desirable, and possibly a highly developed way to write. (See Hillocks, 1986, for a further development of this argument.) The teacher here seems influenced by Calkins's preference; only when Andrea begins *in medias res* does she avoid the green line. With such instruction, we should not be surprised that these students develop as Graves predicts they will.

Another writing behavior favored by the researchers is for students to write about personal experiences. The comments from both teachers and researchers, as reported in their articles, indicate that it is the only form of writing they regard as legitimate for children. Graves

(1979b) lauds the teacher who encourages writing about personal experiences. "Brian's teacher," he relates, "believed that revision is easiest when it relates to writing about personal experience. It is easier to confirm the truth of personal experience than the stories of fantasies" (p. 315). Graves praises the teacher for encouraging Brian to abandon his natural impulse for writing fiction, and turn instead to writing about personal experience. After Brian begins to produce such text spontaneously, Graves says that "once children like Brian feel control of the writing process from the choice of topic, selecting the best lead to the clarification of experience through several drafts, a Copernican revolution has taken place. The center of control is more in the child's hands than in the teacher's" (p. 316). The evidence is stronger, however, that Brian's natural path of development has been thrown off course, and that his behavior is being carefully shaped by the researchers and his teachers. He is simply following his teacher's explicit instructions and trying to satisfy her to the best of his ability. Nowhere in Graves's publications do we find a reason for believing that personal experience writing is a superior and highly developed form of expression; rather, we simply have the claim that it is so, followed by the evidence that children can produce it when so directed.

Another unproven claim permeating the writing of this research group is that the highest stage of writing resembles the writing processes of "professional writers," such as William Faulkner and Rumer Godden; in other words, people who have earned reputations for publishing fiction. Godden, for instance, is quoted by Sowers (1979, p.834) as saying, "Of course one never knows in draft if it is going to turn out, even with my age and experience," a statement she used to encourage spontaneous rather than planned writing. She also gives Faulkner's description of his writing process: "It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does" (p. 834). This nebulous sense of the writing process is praised by Calkins (1981, p. 253) in her descriptions of Andrea: "Once she selects her subject, the story seems to write itself." On the other end of the spectrum we have Chris, who "is scornful of this [spontaneous] process, not realizing it is the process most professional writers experience" (Calkins, 1980a, p. 12).

This continual reference to the authority of “professional writers” is bothersome for a number of reasons. First of all, their definition for “professional writers” is very narrow, excluding journalists, researchers who must publish to further their careers, essayists, and other wordsmiths who do not go trotting around after characters but rather produce text that is highly structured, usually planned, and clearly focused. It is also often written for pay and very real and meaningful to them.

Also questionable is the manner in which these educators present this “professional” writing process as the ultimate style without giving any reasons for why they have made this determination. Instead, they assume that the weighty reference to the authority of literary greats such as Faulkner makes it a legitimate claim, in the process committing the logical fallacy of the argument *ad verecundiam*, an appeal “to awe,” which seeks the acceptance of a conclusion based on its endorsement by those who are highly respected. The teachers in the study even use this to influence the children. Here is an exchange reported by Graves (1981a, pp. 185-186) between teacher and student:

Teacher: How could you show [that these ideas] were connected?

Chris: I could put an arrow down here pointing to the part that’s at the top.

Teacher: Good, but you’ll need to connect the arrow with the top. This is what writers do when they are getting their books ready for the publisher.

With his teacher, a researcher, and the mystique and authority of a professional writer behind this approach, Chris has little alternative but to develop in this fashion. Later in this article, Graves says that “It is natural to want children to progress. But our anxieties about child growth lead us to take control of the writing away from children” (p. 188). Yet, through their interventions, this is precisely what this research team has done.

The possibility also exists that Graves and his colleagues have, in addition to their use of direct instruction, influenced student behavior in subtle and unconscious ways. I am reminded of Clever Hans, the turn-of-the-century European horse who performed in public and seemingly had human consciousness, apparently being able to solve

arithmetical problems, spell and define words, identify musical notes and intervals, and display powers of abstract reasoning. He could answer almost any question put to him in German, his responses coming in the form of tapping his hoof, shaking his head, or walking over and pointing to letters on a board or objects on a rack. He performed these feats not only for his trainer, a man found to be of scrupulous integrity, but to the unqualified satisfaction of an elite panel of skeptical experts who studied him.

Finally, psychologist Oskar Pfungst (1911) carried out a serious and scientific investigation of the horse's behavior. At first Pfungst was amazed to find that, although he was not coaching or cuing the horse, Clever Hans could answer any question he put to him, even in the absence of his trainer. Through controlled experiments, though, he found that Hans could answer questions only when the questioner knew the answer; he found further that Hans could not answer questions when he could not see his questioner. Considerable research led him to conclude that a questioner, when watching Hans answer a question, would pay close attention and thus produce a tenseness that resulted in an extremely subtle slouching of the head. This would cue Hans to begin tapping, or whatever behavior would answer the question. When Hans had given the correct number of taps in response to the question, the questioner, sensing that the horse should stop, would subtly raise his head and straighten up. Pfungst determined that the horse was reading these involuntary cues on the part of the questioners. In all of Pfungst's experiments, the questioners denied knowledge of giving these cues; yet extensive research revealed that they were responsible for the illusion of the horse's (and, in some of Pfungst's experiments, trained human subjects') ability to read minds and answer questions and perform in the manner expected of them.

In Graves's studies, the researchers claim that students arrive at certain decisions about their writing with no guidance (aside from the interventions) from the teachers or researchers. Yet the conclusions that the children come to are always those predicted by the researchers. Is it possible that the researchers, and the teachers in the classrooms they are studying, are providing subtle and unconscious approval of certain decisions made by their students, and disapproval of undesirable decisions? Graves and his colleagues maintain that they are observing students without influencing or leading them in any direction; says Graves (1981b, p. 113), the teachers in his study "have

placed the responsibility for writing where it belongs, with the children. They believe that it is the child's responsibility to teach them about what they know."

Yet an analysis of their reports reveals a distinct bias for certain writing styles and processes that the researchers praise in certain children, and critically note the absence of in others. Graves notes that in this study the teachers and researchers were working very closely together: "Over coffee, at lunch, at breaks when gym, art, and music were taught, teachers asked questions about their children and the relation of the data to their teaching. . . . In a short time the mystique of 'research and researcher' were removed," and the teachers and researchers were able to collaborate on the research effort. Under such intimate conditions, the biases of the researchers could easily be transmitted to the teachers, creating an atmosphere encouraging certain behaviors. Operating, then, under the impression that a "developmental scale" exists in which the best students write in the manner of "professional writers," following spontaneous renderings of personal experiences rather than planned efforts or fiction, these teachers and the researchers who are constantly in attendance and even occasionally participating in the instruction, could be offering subtle signs of encouragement for some behaviors, and subtle discouragement for undesirable behaviors. I would not suggest that this is deliberate, for we will recall that in Pfungst's experiments, the questioners were never aware that they were issuing what Pfungst (and Hans) saw to be clear signals identifying the correct or anticipated response.

I was not in these classrooms, so I can hardly make any claims as to what actually was happening. I do offer this, though, as an alternate interpretation of the results of their research. Since their studies do not control for this possibility, we can not say for certain. I would be interested to see how these children would respond, however, if the study were repeated with teachers and researchers of a different bias. Indeed, this is a major problem with regarding Graves's work as research: He and his colleagues do not look for negative evidence for their hypotheses. All of their reported results give an enthusiastic endorsement of the theories that they are testing; nowhere do we see them raising questions about whether the evidence does in fact support their hypotheses. The purpose of this article is to ask some of those questions.

Ironically, Graves maintains that his intensive study is the only way to get a fair picture of context. However, with such a heavy concentration on certain individuals, we do not in fact get an accurate view of the educational context at all. In the New Hampshire study, we get a restricted view of the whole classroom, receiving instead accounts of the activities of certain students. A scan of 11 articles written by the Graves team, covering 137 pages, reveals that 30 different children were referred to; Andrea is mentioned on 41 pages, and only one other student is referred to on more than 10 (Sarah, 15 pages). The 29 students other than Andrea are mentioned on a total of 92 pages, an average of just over 3 per student. Graves finds the rigor and difficulty with his research in the selection of significant and representative behaviors, and his ability to interpret them and extrapolate their meaning to all other learning situations. In accepting his research, then, we must have faith in: (1) the significance of the behaviors he reports; (2) the insignificance of the behaviors he does not report, and/or those that he reports but dismisses as insignificant; (3) the reliability of his interpretations of the immediate behavior; and (4) the reliability of his extrapolations to all situations. We must wonder, though, how representative the behaviors he reports are when he concentrates so heavily on a few individuals, particularly such a talented child as Andrea.

My point in this article is not that "the Graves method" is without merit; the legions of teachers who employ it would no doubt scoff at such a suggestion. My concern is that he and his colleagues have represented, seemingly without challenge, their classroom observations as research, when they more resemble journalism about ideas that work well under favorable circumstances, particularly when the instructors have such great enthusiasm for their work that it positively affects their students' attitudes. Indeed, the inspirational tone in which their reports are written, and that no doubt had existed in the classrooms where the instruction took place, may account to some extent for the success of the methods they report. Before we can attribute their success to solid research findings that describe general human behavior, we must test them under conditions that have better controls to rule out the many alternative explanations for the performance of the children in Graves's study.

REFERENCES

- Barrs, M. (1983). The new orthodoxy about writing: Confusing process and pedagogy. *Language Arts*, 60, 829-840.
- Becker, H. (1968). Social observation and social case studies. In D. L. Sills (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social sciences* (pp. 232-238). New York: Macmillan.
- Calkins, L. (1979). Andrea learns to make writing hard. *Language Arts*, 56, 569-576.
- Calkins, L. (1980a). Children learn the writer's craft. *Language Arts*, 57, 207-213.
- Calkins, L. (1980b). Children's rewriting strategies. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 14, 331-341.
- Graves, D. (1979a). Case study of a nine year old writer. In D. H. Graves (Ed.), *A case study observing the development of primary children's composing, spelling, and motor behaviors during the writing process, final report* (pp. 239-262). Durham: University of New Hampshire.
- Graves, D. (1979b). Research doesn't have to be boring. *Language Arts*, 56, 76-80.
- Graves, D. (1979c). What children show us about revision. *Language Arts*, 56, 312-319.
- Graves, D. (1979c). Andrea learns to make writing hard. *Language Arts*, 56, 569-576.
- Graves, D. (1980). A new look at writing research. *Language Arts*, 57, 913-919.
- Graves, D. (1981a). Patterns of child control of the writing process. In D. H. Graves (Ed.), *A case study observing the development of primary children's composing, spelling, and motor behaviors during the writing process, final report* (pp. 177-188). Durham: University of New Hampshire.
- Graves, D. (1981b). A new look a research on writing. In S. Haley James (Ed.), *Perspectives on writing in grades 1-8* (pp. 93-116). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Graves, D. (1983a). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Graves, D. (1983b). Teacher intervention in children's writing: A response to Myra Barrs. *Language Arts*, 60, 841-846
- Graves, D., & Murray, D. (1982). Revision: In the writers' workshop and in the classroom. In R. D. Walshe (Ed.), *Donald Graves in Australia*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Hillocks, G. (1986). The writer's knowledge: Theory, research, and implications for practice. In A. R. Petrosky & D. Bartholomae (Eds.), *The teaching of writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kamler, B. (1980). One child, one teacher, one classroom: The story of one piece of writing. *Language Arts*, 57, 680-693.
- Pfungst, O. (1911). *Clever Hans*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Smagorinsky, P. (1986). An apology for structured composition instruction. *Written Communication*, 3(1), 105-121.
- Sowers, S. (1979). A six-year-old's writing process: The first half of first grade. *Language Arts*, 56, 829-835.

Peter Smagorinsky teaches English at Oak Park and River Forest High School in Oak Park, Illinois, and is working on a Ph.D. in English education at the

University of Chicago. He has published journalism, and fiction and satire in small literary magazines. He has published previously in Written Communication, and has coauthored with Tom McCann and Steve Kern an NCTE ERIC/TRIP book, Explorations: Introductions for Literature and Composition 7-12. He has presented at numerous national and local conferences, and has written curriculum for the United States Information Agency to be taught in secondary school overseas.