

# THINKING ABOUT METHODOLOGY: STUDENT INITIATED ACTIVE LEARNING IN READING AND WRITING

JAMES BENSON

*The Buffalo Public Schools  
Buffalo, New York*

YONG G. HWANG

*Louisiana State University  
Shreveport, Louisiana 71105*

This article identifies and examines the often unnoticed aspects of some instructional methodologies that draw such subtle attention to themselves that the methodologies themselves become the focus of learning instead of the content of the lesson. In particular, the area of teaching reading and writing is explored. The authors suggest that if the practitioner initiates assignments constantly, he/she may prevent students from ever learning to initiate writing when the teacher is not present in their lives.

Similarly, if the teachers always initiate meaning statements in the reading of text and never encourage students to self discover meaning, students will not search for deeper levels of meaning in the text unless the teacher is present. The authors maintain that this scenario of constant teacher initiation of thought assures that when formal instruction ends, students are "trained" out of reading and writing on their own. Suggestions such as journal writing and double entry drafting are extensively explored as means to eliminating what the authors call the "first step fallacy."

"One must learn by doing the thing: though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try (Publius Syrus, first century B.C.E.)"

In a passing conversation with a reporter for *The Buffalo News*, he was asked how he learned his craft. He replied that he was an avid reader from an early age and that this self-initiated reading laid the real foundations for his learning to write. This professional writer readily attributes his writing career to his own action rather than to the 16 years he spent in the institutions of elementary school, secondary school, or college.

This exchange suggests that the very things we expect to be the outcomes of teaching reading and writing, things such as self-initiated reading and writing, are not the actual outcomes of teaching. (On the contrary, often we find that many students and adults do not read

or write when outside the classroom.) If we examine the average high school graduate, we often find that his/her adult reading and writing interests are small, thus accounting for a serious shortcoming in the goal to make students into lifelong learners.

This essay will explore how some methodologies, though time tested and seemingly effective, may actually interfere with the desired outcomes of having students become lifelong readers and writers. In fact, in an age of great interest in multiple methodologies, we have to inquire just how many methodologies call attention to themselves at the expense of specific desired outcomes. Is it possible that a method may inadvertently prevent a desired outcome? By looking at some of the common instructional methods used in the educational community today, we may find some unexpected answers in the affirmative. This would

explain why a professional writer readily reports that his skills are more the result of his own reading than the years of formal education that we would expect to be more influential in forming those skills.

Consider an example of a common teaching strategy for writing. Most teachers assign topics and guide the students along in some predetermined set of writing patterns, perhaps emphasizing one or more tenets of writing such as grammar and/or development. A science paper is written about a scientific topic; a social studies paper about a topic pertinent to a course consideration; an English paper about a topic in literature. We have seen the usual assignment both as students and as teachers. It is a widespread schematic. What could possibly be wrong? What more is there?

Remember the reporter's comment - he learned to write by doing his own reading. He did not primarily learn it from the assigned reading or writing of sixteen years of formal education. The suggestion of this paper is that the difference lies in the very first step of the process. This is the phenomenon of the "first step fallacy."

If the teacher always makes the "first step" in assignments during sixteen years of education by picking a topic, it would not be out of line to expect the student to learn that the teacher must always be there to initiate the act of writing and that without the teacher, there is no first step, no topic. If that is true, it follows that there is no second, fourth or tenth step once the student leaves school. Why should there be? So the startling implication here is that the methodology prevents students from arriving at the desired outcome. The first step fallacy explains why there is a difference between those independent students who write on their own, and who may have the proverbial dresser drawer full of writing at home, and the majority of students, less independent, who have been unwittingly trained for years to write only when the teacher picks a topic(s) for them

to write about. The very methodology prevents the student from arriving at the desired outcome of writing independently. Those who enjoy writing are hampered by this first step fallacy; those who hate writing are likewise hampered by it. Only the few, the independent, the brave, get beyond the strict regimen of the teacher being the one who is smart enough to start writing. If the student is generally given the first step in his learning process - is never or very seldom allowed to develop his or her own first step skill and the range of factors required of that independent set, then when the first step is not provided by the teacher the learner will not write. This coincides with the reality of the majority of the population not writing once the setting of the classroom is removed. It is as if we obtained the latest and fastest computer, hired an expensive, skilled computer operator, had him/her input 180 days of carefully selected data, and then after 12 years of this capability, effort, and money woke up one morning to realize that the computer has crashed and that all the input has been lost, leaving us, as Shakespeare said of overtly pompous actors, "capable of nothing but inexplicable, dumb shows" (*Hamlet* III,ii,11). As with Shakespeare's over enthusiastic players who drew undue attention themselves and thus distracted the audience "from some necessary question of the play," we have likewise seen excellent teachers proudly assign students excellent topics ad infinitum thereby distracting students from their own excellent topics. In our educational drama, if assigning teacher-made topics is "overdone", the students become an audience distracted from valuing and making their own first steps and, in effect, will have been trained not to write!

This also explains the difficulty students have when, on occasion, an innovative teacher asks students to initiate a topic. For if a student is seldom asked to take his/her own first step in thinking seriously then there is no reason to expect that a few assignments will suffice to

undo the damage. Usually students learn to become dependent on the teacher, contrary to one of the most important goals of education suggested by Schloss and Smith (1995) - teach learners to not need teachers any more. Students must be able to generalize skills and use them independently in natural/uncontrolled settings. However, in classrooms across the country, if the teacher is taken away, the student goes into a kind of academic writing withdrawal. The student has been trained to lose his/her sense of wonder, of thinking. For those students that are writers the secret dresser drawer full of poems and journals lies hidden at home. The student is almost ashamed to have written on his/her own, without an approved, teacher generated, for credit, topic. Most people's urge to write is severely stunted by this methodology and is replaced by a stilted, unowned prose. Along with this lost urge, the sense of wonder and creativity of expression, the very things good writing is based on, is similarly lost.

If there is a natural urge to think, wonder and write, it may be able to be seen before years of the methodology takes hold. One primary grade teacher we know reports that when her first grade students, barely able to overcome the difficulties of the unwieldy pencil, are allowed to have "free choice" of topics at the writing center, they become exuberant at the idea of being able to write "whatever we want?" If first graders, with their limited years of experience get excited about initiating their own topics, imagine how much more personal experience older students have and could write about if they were expected year after year to initiate their own topics. We may be squashing our best writing resource, the ownership of thought, in the name of "covering curriculum," or in the name of methodology, when practitioners repeatedly include the first step fallacy in their lesson routines.

Consider the art of teaching reading at the secondary level. Generally, the higher levels of

reading require some outside knowledge and the cognitive ability to actively engage in thinking out how the words on the page have useful meaning. Suppose the energetic, concerned teacher selects an appropriate reading from science, social studies, or literature and then, precisely because the teacher is energetic and enthusiastic, hands out a series of questions about the reading. Again, as with writing, the first step of what to do with a passage, find a point of valued meaning, is trained out of students by a methodology. If the first step of thinking about and finding a point of meaning that is valuable to the reader is taken away, if students are inadvertently being told "do not try this at home," then the desired outcome of creating independent readers, of getting students and adults to read on their own, is being defeated by the methodology. The first step, that of self-initiated search for valued meaning, is defeated. But what is encouraged, what is law, what is graded, is to follow the "meaning discoveries" of the teacher inherent in work sheet of questions. The teacher makes the first step by asking a question, or picking a word or phrase to examine. If the first step is rigorously insisted upon, as it is so frequently during 12 or 16 years of formal education, then the methodology is sending the message that, "I can't really read unless the teacher first asks a pointed questions about the passage. I can't write unless the teacher tells me what topic is worthwhile writing about." Many students know precisely how long to wait before the average teacher suggests his/her own thoughts about a text rather than wait for the students to come up with their own, initially less pointed, meaning discoveries. How many students, when faced with the assigned task of writing about a novel, immediately go out to get a copy of *Monarch* or *Cliff notes*? Do students do this because they have been inadvertently taught that their own meaning discoveries are not worthy?

The result of the traditional methodology is that students are being told not to think, read

or write unless the teacher does the first step. After 12 years of such methodology, only those being encouraged otherwise at home, say, or those few with a totally confident and independent streak inside themselves learn to read and write frequently with insight. We end up in full view of the meaning behind Shakespeare's famous line: "Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied (*Romeo and Juliet*, II,iii,19)."

Fortunately, this first step fallacy can be easily modulated and remedied.

This paradigm shift from first step fallacy to student initiated discovery might best be conceptualized by contrasting analogies. Most of us have the experience of driving a car. This experience is one where we are in complete control of steering and where the road is fixed and easily traveled. If we point the vehicle in the direction we wish to go, it goes there. That is because we are working pretty much within a fixed set of mechanical forces. If students were such a fixed commodity, teaching might prove as easy as pointing them in a direction and steering them there. But they are not. Teaching is more complex than driving because students are not the same as machines operating in a plane of mechanical vectors.

In contrast, consider the notion of sailing. Here we have hidden, shifting, and often uncontrollable forces such as winds and currents. The sailor has learned that the best way to get from point A to point B is to tack back and forth in cooperation with these shifting, unseen forces, to, in effect, work with and compensate for changing winds and currents. By constantly checking his course for drift, yaw and wind direction, the sailor turns something with more variables than driving a car into a successful form of navigation. Teaching is a bit more like the act of sailing than the act of driving a car. The teacher who can tack back and forth with the student, work in cooperation with the variables of discovery learning, will get to his/her destination in time with the crew intact.

In the classroom, practitioners often feel that the best way to proceed is to teach by initiating questions or topics, as discussed above. The first step fallacy suggests that following a course of such methodologies, may be stifling even our best students. We all know very bright students who follow the teachers' directions mechanically and end up lacking spark of their own. So we must shift to a methodology that more frequently insists that students take significant share of first steps. Teachers can then "tack" back and forth between the students' personal first steps and the practitioner's expertise thereby reaching the ultimate goal of studied, but independent, lifelong learning.

Consider how this might be done in the real world of writing and reading. In writing, practitioners can create a situation in which the student is familiar with, and capable of, making the first step. That simply means that the student must initiate the writing. The easiest way to do this is to have students write journals on their own topics. Sometimes a teacher will discuss topics and assume that discussing is sufficient, that students' own thoughts have in this way been sufficiently added into the mix. However, as Francis Bacon observed, conversation may make a person "ready", but it is writing that makes a person "exact". If a teacher does not insist that the student frequently initiate topics and then write at some length about them, then that teacher leaves the student with conversational thoughts untempered by the further demands of exactitude inherent in the writing act.

Imagine one possible scenario of setting up student initiated writing. First, one of the amazing things about students is that when given a chance as a group to list their own topics that they feel are significant, learners can and will, during one class period, fill up a full set of blackboards in a classroom with such topics. It is not unusual to get 200 or so topics in one class period. If the students are left to pick one of their own topics to write about, and if this

is done often enough, the students will learn that their own thoughts about life or the things of life, really are important enough to write about. That is exactly what the students who write for their dresser drawer at home have found out and that is exactly what great authors have found out. Once this self-initiated first step of finding topics to consider has been done by the student and then 10 or 15 brief journal entries (page and a half) have been completed, the teacher can ask students to select one entry to be developed into a formal paper for presentation to the class. The student is now guided by the teacher not into a topic, but rather into a request for considered, even, and lengthy development after the student has invested himself/herself into the first step. By asking students to use example, question and answer, references, anecdote, description, and a group of other methods of development, the student learns that he/she must take his/her own topic and own thoughts even more seriously than may have been done at first.

After this first set of journals and one formal, presented paper, the teacher may occasionally suggest a topic, but the student is encouraged rather, to choose his/her own for more journal entries. If seriously encouraged, students will easily find that there are a thousand topics inside of themselves worth writing about, some personal like important family events, some more objective like why society operates the way it does or does not. Once the teacher has set up expectations that the students will write extensively about a topic of the student's own choice, the teacher's job will be to constantly support reflective thinking in the class and respect for student generated thoughts. A class that is frequently thinking and discerning the problems or joys of life is a much more rewarding experience not only for the students, but also for teachers. The teacher is supportive with thinking and awareness strategies (e.g., literature, brainstorming, brain teasers, discussions, current events, etc.).

To continue, a second formal paper is requested, chosen now from the 20-25 journal articles. The students learn that their classmates have more in them than just casual, cafeteria talk. Presenting papers to the class allows students to publish their work (Englert, Tarrant, & Marriage, 1992), thus bringing to respected closure the writing act, and simultaneously satisfying the teacher's concern for the fifth step of the writing process. Students engaged in thinking and reacting to real student topics expand their own resources for "real" student-initiated topics and real writing, and at the same time learn that student topics are now respected every bit as much as teacher topics. Valuing writing is reinforced over a period of time to the degree that the students' own thinking is valued by others through sharing it with a student audience.

One teacher we know, simply asked his students to "bring me your poems." Nothing more specific was said. The teacher released the students' "secret poems" from their dresser drawers. Because the students were too nervous to read them, he created a "Poetry Day" on which he read for the student authors. The teacher even dressed up in a white tuxedo to visually show respect for this special occasion of student writing. The writers sat and watched to see how their real, deep writing would be taken by the other students. Students loved each other's own real writing! This quickly became a special day everyone looked forward to. As the year went on the real poetry caught on among the non-poets. Everyone profited. This also helped students to see that the poets in the books are real people with real topics, just like themselves. Further, reading poetry from the anthology, dreaded by many students and maybe even more by some teachers, became not only more understandable but also more relevant to their own act of writing, thinking and feeling.

Tacking back and forth between student-initiated ideas and teacher requests to take that

writing seriously enough to develop it and present it, gradually gave students confidence and skills in initiating their own first steps in writing. They had now given themselves permission to take their own minds and their own writing seriously and could now write without a dependency on the obsequious teacher assignment. In the course of one school year it would be entirely possible to generate 50 self-initiated rough draft journal entries of about a page and a half each and perhaps four or five developed papers with topics selected from the rough-draft journals. If students were expected to use their first step minds for 12 years, the outcomes could match the practitioner's methodological expectations of cultivating lifelong learners/writers.

Consider reading. Practitioners know that students will fill in worksheets if practitioners ask. And it is possible to grade that. And the outcome of that common methodology may very well continue to be major numbers of non-readers. It is also, on the other hand, possible to ask for and get student initiated responses to literature. This generally starts with letting students in on the secret of active reading (Berthoff, 1978) that is the basis for making the usual teacher generated work sheet. The secret is that the reader must put aside his/her doubt that literature is worthwhile (the willing suspension of disbelief revisited) and begin to trust that meaning actually does reside in the texts of famous authors just as it resides in their own writing. If the teacher has taken the students' own writing and ideas seriously, the student has a better personal platform upon which to trust that other writers also have inserted sincere meaning into their texts. Meanings lie in a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a passage of text. The student/reader must find owned or personal meaning in reading a text even though in the beginning some of that found meaning may be outside of a final or expert gathering of textual meaning. The practitioner is not working with that old paradigm

of the mechanical plane of vectors and in the classroom must tack back and forth between meaning discovered by students and other more studied discoveries of the experts. In practice, these discoveries will often enough coincide. The discoveries of the student are necessary even if they don't at first coincide with experts because it is the very process of first step discovery of meaning that must be nurtured if students are likely to read on their own.

There are words that stand out in a text. We might call these loaded chunks of text "bell ringers" - they beg for attention. It is the reader who must find the "bell ringer" in a text and must tell or write in what ways it is meaningful. The best example of creating a classroom context for this self-initiated reading process (one not controlled or initiated by an outside reader) is the Double Entry Draft. (Berthoff, 1982) This method shifts the usual reading paradigm from expecting the teacher or text book to ask questions about a passage to expecting the student to find at least one meaningful word or set of words from the text. In writing a double entry draft the student writes this self-discovered "chunk" of meaning/text on the left side of a piece of paper. This is the first entry. The second, or doubled, entry is put on the right side of the paper opposite the first "bell ringer" entry and tells about how and why the student finds the first entry to be significant. The teacher can expand the student's first step reading response by prompting the student to reflect and develop the meaning side of the paper in various ways. For instance, the student could be asked to write about what the word or phrase from the text has to do with the rest of the story, what it has to do with the student's own life, what it has to do with life in general, even all three of these. After a number of double entry drafts, the teacher can tack and request a more formal finding by either asking the student to develop a paper on the pattern of meaning found in a group of the student's double entry drafts, or to combine a number of them into one paper to get an overall view of the

piece of literature being considered. Imagine a student finding a word in a play that he/she finds meaningful and then finding instances of that word in the whole play by means of a word search on a computer data base. Another possibility is for the teacher to model a double entry draft and explain that both the piece of chosen text and the way it has meaning is the process that, say, a critic (or the teacher) went through in his own search for meaning. This, then, creates an overlay for the student, that when juxtaposed with more formal written criticism, helps the student to identify with how critics develop ideas of what a text is about.

Though only rough sketches of alternatives to preventing first step fallacy can be included in this article, the main idea of eliminating the first step fallacy by allowing student-initiated reading and writing paradigms and envisioning a tacking maneuver between student-initiated work and teacher developed exercises in more formal work should be a starting place sufficient for the imaginative practitioner to begin thinking about and doing his/her own variations on the theme.

One encouraging aspect of this paradigm shift is that students, once given the chance to have their thinking be the real object of education, may finally make school exciting. Imagine a student body enthused with their own developed thoughts. Imagine a twelve year concerted effort by a school system to insist upon the elimination of first step fallacy. The next step is that students, through this new student-teacher methodology, will seek others' thoughts graciously.

Finally, there is the story of the young boy who went to the Spring carnival with his mother. They came upon a child's train ride and the mother wanted to put the little boy on it. The boy was terrified as he looked at the narrow track down which he would have to steer the train. He didn't think he could ever steer the little train down the track and around all the curves, espe-

cially without his mother. He began to cry loudly but his mother, realizing that the steering wheels on all the cars were not really steering the train but rather were there only for show, and being stronger willed than the little boy, forced him into one of the colorful little engines and put his hands, amid shrieks of terror from the boy, on the wheel. The ride started and the boy, still horror struck at the thought of the impossible responsibility placed on him, grabbed at the wheel and began to steer wildly all by himself. With his heart pounding and his face wet, he successfully made it around the first curve. With each terrifying curve he took heart in hand and successfully overcame the danger.

As he completed more and more curves his tears and fears were marvelously replaced by the confidence that he was a real engineer. "I did it," he screamed though no one heard him for all the mixed carnival music and other noise. As the train slowed up and stopped and the mother went to collect her brave new engineer, she could see he was now full of a proud new excitement.

He now excitedly screamed at her with the brightest of eyes and the proudest heart, "Again mommy, again!"

And that is a true story about a little boy - and about students, about teachers, and about what brave engineers have to go through.

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