

# Literacy: New directions, new dilemmas

---

Richard Ward

*Most of the commentators on literacy agree that being literate in the modern world requires a more complex form of literacy than ever before...*

*(Moffett, 1981; Luke 1993; Ware, 1995)*

This view points out that to be an effective participant in a modern, democratic community requires a kind of literacy that encompasses a wider range of functions and purposes than ever before, and which operates in a society that is changing more rapidly and is more culturally complex than any traditional society.

Some researchers (Christie, 1989) go so far as to advocate that research be urgently undertaken to assess what genres people need in order to function in the modern world. As most literacy programmes adequately equip members for effective communication in the home and the recreational/sporting setting, one can only assume that she is referring to literacy for the workplace. Presumably the outcome of such a research project would be a list of functional genre (probably forms of writing) that would be seen to be enabling and therefore useful.

The logical step from this would be to prescribe useful forms of writing that schools could teach. These could be organised into clumps to be taught at each level - say six per term. In this way there would be an obvious link between school literacy programmes and what is deemed useful to be literate in the workplace. It would be functional, prescriptive, objective and, what's more, could be easily translated by an enterprising publisher into a series of workbooks and accompanying assessment modules. Wouldn't it be remarkable for an employer to know beforehand that a prospective employee could write an invoice, take a telephone message and use a dictated message to write a convincing business letter!

The movement has probably started. The English Curriculum (English in the New Zealand Curriculum, 1996) offers at each level examples of the sorts of transactional writing that should be included in programmes. Admittedly the objectives clearly state that each genre should be learned/practised in a "range of authentic contexts" (p.35). And this is the hint of the first dilemma; whether the learner's purpose for writing and immediate context should decide the appropriate genre or form to be practised, or whether the teacher selects a genre from those suggested and manufactures an authentic

*"To encourage programmes to be based on such prescriptive plans is dangerous and fosters the illusion of 'covering' some kind of syllabus."*

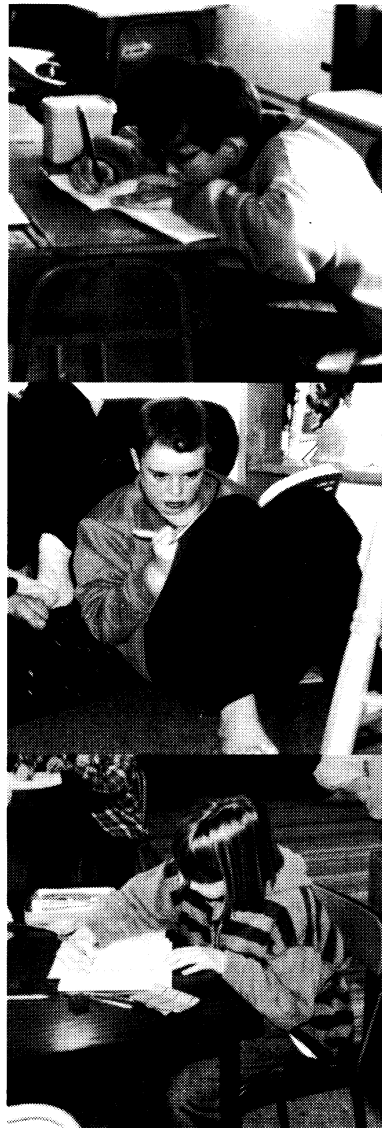
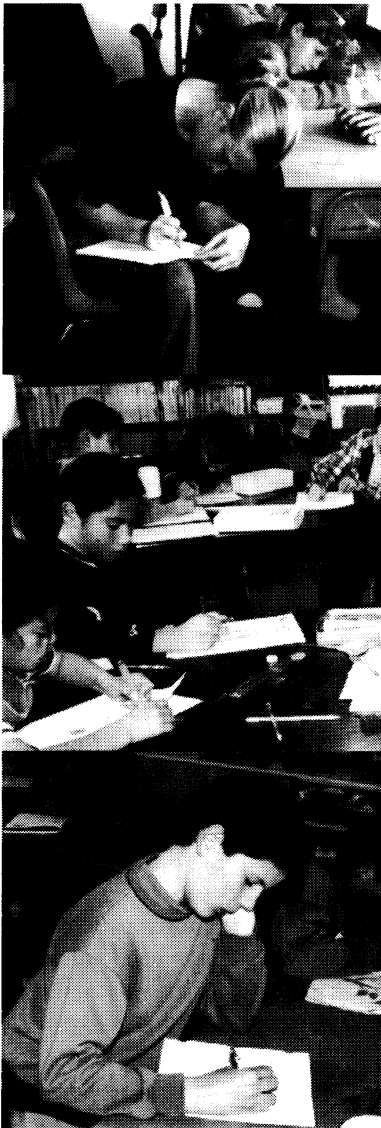
context in which to practice it.

The insidious movement is further advanced in Hood's otherwise useful resource book on writing, *Left to Write Too* (1997) where, in a "model for a school writing plan" (p.42), it suggests the genres to be practised each term for each of three levels. Quite why the Year 4 learner has to do report writing in term 1 before instructional writing in term 2, or even delay poetry writing until term 3 is unclear.

To encourage programmes to be based on such prescriptive plans is dangerous and fosters the illusion of 'covering' some kind of syllabus. If



*Richard Ward is a senior lecturer in reading/language at the School of Education, University of Waikato. He is particularly interested in how children go about writing, and the assessment of their progress.*



*"To continue to follow this trend can only lead to the demise of creative literacy."*

relatively accurate (because accuracy is often the basis for assessment) can be replaced by an expectation that the learner is moving towards accuracy, that their attempts and experiments are based on their interpretations of good models and demonstrations. In this way the functional ethos can be removed from assessment and the first criteria for responding to a piece be its clarity and adequacy of information in fulfilling the writer's purpose.

Then we can ask of our writers, who is manipulating the writing?



it risks ignoring what we've learned about how children learn to write in authentic contexts then it helps the process of alienating children's voice and control of the process. And early writers who begin to lose their control of the writing process, particularly in terms of purpose and audience, quickly adopt a model of the process that is externally motivated. In this context, recipes for transactional writing such as Whitehead's Writing Frameworks (1997) can drive literacy programmes in a manner that the author might not intend. But when the official curriculum offers a clear functional direction and authors of resource books offer supportive tools for effecting these objectives then the trend towards a functional, systemic approach to literacy has begun. And probably

at the expense of a developmental approach where the authors are constructing texts out of their own purposes, motivation and situations.

To continue to follow this trend can only lead to the demise of creative literacy. To be literate for the next millennium must involve our being able to combine a knowledge of text conventions and the characteristics of genre with the author's personal voice. Only then will we be able to use text in an uniquely creative way to generate new genre and new meanings.

If the prescriptive trend is to be avoided, what is needed is at least a shift in direction.

Writing in order to learn the characteristics of a particular genre can be replaced by the learner choosing a form that suits their particular purpose and context. The expectation that the attempt be

## References

- Christie, F. (1989) Literacy for A Changing World ACER p. 1-24  
 Luke, A. (1993) The Social Construction of Literacy in the Primary School.  
 Unsworth, L. (Ed.) Literacy Learning and Teaching. Sydney:Macmillan  
 Moffett, J. (1981) Active Voice: A writing Programme across the Curriculum. New Jersey:Boynton /Cook  
 Ward R.S. (1992) Readings about Writing. Palmerston North:Dunmore Press  
 Ware, B. (1995) Literacy Education. Back to Basics in Reading: What Does This Mean? Unpublished paper.  
 Whitehead, D. (1997) Writing Frameworks. Christchurch: User Friendly Resources

