Recently much has been made of the unprepared work force for the twenty-first century and the failure of public schools to prepare students for the world they will encounter upon leaving school (Finn 1991; Fiske 1991; Schlechty 1990). With business owners, CEOs, politicians, policy-makers, and the media decrying the abysmal state of our graduates, how are we as English language-arts classroom leaders to keep from panicking, to keep from being pushed into "programs" that are touted as being the answer? How are we to interpret the public brouhaha and make daily choices for ourselves and our students that will prepare the workers, thinkers, and leaders of tomorrow? How are we to prepare them for a world in which the only "sure thing" is change and the only "sure way" to succeed is to anticipate change and respond positively (Barker 1992; Daggett 1992; Naisbitt 1982)?

I am happy to report that recent research and theory in English language arts provide a grounded response to the business leaders, political commissions, and media representatives who bemoan our present and future state. The recommendations that have emerged in our field as a result of several decades of work are now finding a forum—one that affirms, even demands, the student proficiencies we have long been working toward.

As I view and listen to media documentaries, commission reports (The Hudson Institute 1987; National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983; Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer 1988), and messages from business (Daggett; Drucker 1989) and futurists (Barker; Naisbitt; Toffler 1980), I see five areas of proficiency that those who join the world of work will need.

1. **Ability to communicate:** Future workers must be able to communicate by using language effectively in a variety of contexts; that is, having determined the audience and the purpose of the situation, they will respond appropriately, whether in written or oral form. Workers should be able to listen, negotiate, and compromise in language selected carefully to fit a variety of situations and a variety of audiences. They need to be able to function in teams to create, develop, and refine ideas, solutions, and products. Strong communication skills will make this interaction possible.

2. **Ability to work in a multicultural setting:** Since our society and our work force continue to become pluralistic, workers need to listen, be empathic and knowledgeable of other cultures, and use language sensitively when communicating with people from cultures other than their own. To communicate in such a fashion, workers need to be open-minded, even politely curious, about society's diverse members.

3. **Ability to adapt:**

4. **Ability to think critically:**

5. **Ability to use available technology:**

In the sound bytes and print-media reports that most of us experience, there is little clarification or explanation of these proficiencies. Rather the media predict the demise of our global dominance and extol the education of other countries—without carefully drawn parallels. I offer the following descriptions to clarify the proficiencies that our students as future workers will need in order to be successful.

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Ability to adapt: A work environment that involves open communication with diverse workers also requires its members to learn new skills in a fast-developing society and to adjust to the changing demographics and cultures of fellow-workers. To respond to a society that changes its requirements frequently, workers need to be able to re-envision themselves, their co-workers, their roles, and their tasks. Workers who are caught in old visions will be abandoned, left to their narrow views. Workers who know how to learn, how to cast new light on problems and issues, will remain.

Ability to think critically: This area takes a little more perseverance to figure out, but it appears that businesses expect future workers to reason not just with logic but also with care, with genuine concern as well as cold ratiocination. They should be able to evaluate with expanded mental horizons, not critique with limited vision. They will need to assess value, keeping in mind diverse perspectives, and to know consciously the processes for coming to know—that is, know about knowing. They need to bring to texts, written or oral, an inquiring responsive mind that probes, sees relationships, considers alternatives, predicts, and analyzes.

Ability to use available technology: Workers in the future need to be able to use available technology. They need to be familiar with the potential of personal computers and multimedia equipment so that they can use highly developed networks and data bases. Being facile in the use of technology requires the transfer and application of the first four proficiencies. That is, technology users must be able to communicate within and across worlds, must be adaptable in dealing with various cultures and ideas, and must be thinkers who care about their own learning to the point that they constantly are open to changing paradigms.

It does not take a rocket scientist to see that the English language arts emphasize these five proficiencies. We must seize this day, provide the leadership for classroom instruction that will ready our students for the work world they will soon enter. The student-centered (Tchudi and Mitchell 1989), student-sensitive (Purves, Rogers, and Soter 1990) classroom that emphasizes the teaching/learning process is not only desirable, but necessary.

A new portrait of the English language-arts classroom and the English language-arts teacher is taking shape. When visitors walk into classrooms, they may see students moving around; they may not see desks in straight rows; they may see carpet squares, bean bags, and a sofa in the room; and they may even see a decorative screen or a wooden loft creating private spaces in the room. Students may be talking among themselves in pairs or small groups, while others are writing or reading and the teacher is sitting beside a student listening. Students may not be of the same ability level, and they may not even be at the same grade level.

If the visitors stay for a few days, they may also notice that the teacher does not lecture for long periods of time. The teacher may look and act more like a guide, a director, a coach; or the teacher may be posing questions with and for students so that they can search for answers collaboratively. However, the teacher in this room is not afraid to teach, not afraid to guide firmly, not afraid to clarify students' concerns or answer questions. The teacher is still the adult in the classroom but a learner with the students, just as the students are learners with the teacher. In short, the teacher is a leader.

People now entering the work force do not need scads of discrete pieces of information. Changing roles in the workplace do not call for recitations of dramatis personae, the parts of the paragraph, or grammar rules. Nor will many places require workers to write a five-paragraph composition or cite...
spelling rules. Rather, workers' abilities to communicate will require that they be able to use information, find ways of communicating with others by being curious and by defining and exploring issues that may be a common ground for conversation and discussion. Workers also will need to be able to write clearly, examine issues carefully, and see problems from unique perspectives. The work world is calling for "paradigm pioneers" or "paradigm shifters." (Barker).

English Journal readers know that isolated pieces of information, isolated skill-building exercises, and five-paragraph compositions are not the norm for environments outside of school. What else do we know from English language-arts research, theories, and practice that can make us instructional leaders in our schools and communities as well as in our classrooms? What do we already propose for instruction that is congruent with the requirements of future workers? What accomplishments in our field can we celebrate and invite others to join?

Writing: We already know that in the teaching of writing, approaches which guide and support students in the development of their own composing processes help them become better writers. We know that writers must consciously attend to their audience and their purpose in order to assume a voice that will be appropriate to the reader. We also know that writing is a valuable tool for learning. Through writing, students understand their own meaning so as to question, explore, and clarify in order to communicate and persuade.

As for collaboration, the English language arts have addressed the importance of peer response to writing. We have found that this interaction not only assists the writer in the development of writing but also assists the responder, who gains as a writer, a reader, a thinker, through talk with a peer. Such collaboration enables students to evaluate themselves and their own writing more competently and efficiently, making it possible for them to benefit from keeping a portfolio of their work, evaluating their own progress as evidenced in that compendium of work, and discussing that work with teachers, parents, and other students. We also know that word processing can be a valuable tool for students who are hesitant to "copy over" or revise, who have poor handwriting, or who have trouble editing their own handwriting.

Literature: Reader-response theory and research continue to have enormous impact on our approaches to teaching literature. By building students' language and experiential schema, we guide and support their exploration of literature. We also know the value of encouraging students from diverse cultures to respond and share their perspectives. If our classroom population is not diverse, we guide students to consider literature from the point of view of a reader who may be from a different culture or who may have a contrasting view of the work. This acknowledgement of pluralism also leads us to guide our students' selection of literature so that it represents diverse cultures, experiences, and languages.

We have discovered that individualized, free-reading approaches offer students a choice and provide a balance to in-common reading. Both strategies support collaborative talk as well as writing. Finding strength in both approaches, we honor individuals as well as the group. Gone are the days when we require that all students read the same selection at the same time in the same way.

We have applied the writing-to-learn research to literature study, recognizing the value of exploring, questioning, and predicting through writing. Students may write to each other, to the teacher, or to themselves. As they discover what they think and what they wonder about, they develop the ability to analyze, to discover their own views, and to explain those views to others. They may interact with others through talking, writing, or computer networks.

Language: As for language instruction, we have learned that the teaching of grammar in isolation does not make students better writers or users of language. Therefore, we have moved toward incorporating grammar, usage, and mechanics into language instruction. We tend to focus on fluency and quality of content in writing before we address issues of correctness and appropriateness of language; we emphasize the importance of audience and purpose when making language choices; and we invite students to use the language they have available to them in classroom work. Then, we are able to explore with students their language selec-
tion and develop various registers of their language from which they can choose.

We work with students to help them appreciate the richness of the languages we have in our country and in the world. Through listening and attending to various language patterns, students develop yet another venue for understanding and respecting cultures different from their own. They learn to respect a variety of dialects, regionalisms, and idioms. Discussing linguistic and cultural differences, students become open-minded to others rather than fearful or intimidated by those who are different from themselves.

If we continue to follow the implications of research and the recommendations for best practice in our classrooms as well as carefully analyze the causes, not just the symptoms, of what business and government leaders are saying, I am convinced that we will be doing our part to produce the kind of workers needed not only now but for the twenty-first century. However, we must not rest on our laurels; there are many new teachers to be supported, experienced teachers to be guided, schoolboard members to be enlightened, parents to be informed, and counter-forces with which to reckon. Our charge is to rely on each other for strength and affirmation in this most challenging of times. Indeed, our time has come! Let us use it well. Let us capitalize on the need for our expertise and become leaders of the much-needed shift to a student-centered/student-sensitive classroom. By retaining confidence in ourselves and in our mission, we can avoid panic and resist programs which diminish our goal of readying students for their future, the future of an ever-changing world.

Works Cited


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