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Why is Structure & Style Effective?

By James B. Webster

I completed a four-year B.A. with honors in history and English in which three to four yearlong courses required three substantial essays each plus a three-hour final exam in which all questions were essay type. The two-year M.A. in history was more of the same plus a 250-page dissertation. Again more of the same for the Ph.D. in England and a thesis which was eventually published as a book. One thing was clear. Elementary and high school had not prepared me for this load of writing. When I began to teach, I determined that my students would know how to write well. My philosophy of teaching involved having children learn skills whatever the content of the subject. Consequently, except for math, all my classes became writing classes. Hence I am impatient with teachers who argue, "We have no time for writing because of all the new subjects such as 'Environmental Studies' which we are compelled to teach."

I taught for 44 years at primary (grades 1-3), special education, elementary (grades 4-7), high school, undergrads for ten years in Africa where all students were ESL, and in Canada for twenty when in the last decade before my retirement my work was supervising M.A. and Ph.D. theses. Every year I taught writing first, and second, whatever content demanded by the powers-that-be. Quickly I learned that almost nothing had been written on how to teach you youths to write. Thus over 44 years by trial and error, I began to adopt what worked and reject what didn't. I was not much interested in why a certain technique worked. I was too busy. If it worked, I adopted it. For example, when my boys were falling behind, I concentrated upon methods to engage them, and Structure & Style has been praised as effective with males.

I attended symposia, in-services, conventions, special speakers, and read lots of books to find small nuggets of help. It was like picking a few grains of rice from heaps of sand. Occasionally a speaker might catch my imagination and seem very logical. Returning to the classroom, I would enthusiastically structure a whole unit for the next month around his method, only to find a gimmick or two worked but as a whole, useless. Maybe lots of fun! But little learning. In addition, during my teaching years, possibly eight waves of new theories of learning swept across North America and sometimes beyond. Just before I retired, it was Whole Language while just after I left Africa, American "experts" were peddling the idea that African students should be taught 10,000 English words which would create functional literacy. Imagine English with its million words being reduced to 10,000. Imagine teaching Shakespeare within a vocabulary of 10,000. Imagine teaching the physical geography of a continent on 10,000 words. My vocabulary in French easily runs to 10,000 words but can't even imagine my essay in

that language about Moliere. Functional literacy means you can order a burger, chips, and beer and ask for the location of the washroom without scaring the natives. Whole language was nearly as comic since for it, much learning seemed to be through osmosis. I could never really grasp that concept. Apparently many students couldn't either.

How are these new theories invented & spread? Many are created in universities, colleges, or think tanks by "experts" who are highly qualified in higher degrees but have little or no teaching experience. They secure a grant to test the new theory with master teachers in a few select classrooms. Naturally the final data supports the theory. A publishing company puts their advertising dollars behind it, pushes it in various states and then obtains a monopoly of the books required for implementing and sustaining it. Once the monopoly ends there will be five or six new theories standing in line, each on with a different publisher waiting to battle it out to control the next wave and next monopoly. How are we different, you may well ask.

Structure & Style emerged over forty years in a variety of classrooms. No "expert" as defined above exists. My area of expertise is pre-colonial, pre-contact West African History. I specialize in the collection and analysis of oral tradition and oral evidence, myth, and legend. Sometimes when I am asked to lecture on writing, my sponsors will want to include my degrees after my name. I tell them that those degrees help me earn a living and are necessary and even compulsory in some circumstances, but they have no bearing on my qualification to teach writing. No institution in the world offers a B.A. or any other degree in teaching writing. Rather, I tell a sponsor to point out my 44 years of teaching, from grade one to Ph.D. Since I do not talk the special lingo of educational faculties, I doubt any state or Canadian province will give my writing method a monopoly. It is too practical and grass-rooted. Good teachers will grasp it and produce students who can write. It will not be imposed on high by a government department upon thousands of teachers who resent the imposition, pretend to comply but continue to teach as they always have. A decade later, testing will show the new idea has failed. One idea bites the dust; another takes over.

These people I have chosen to spread the word about Structure & Style are similar to myself, some have strings of degrees, others do not. They were chosen—with or without degrees—because I have found them to be extraordinary teachers and excellent communicators, with a knowledge and love of the classics of our language and proven success in teaching children of all ages to write using Structure & Style. If they produce results—student achievement results—not marketing results—they become chosen.

Some peculiar results arise from my grass-roots approach: When in one school, a special education teacher gets spectacular results, rumors in the whole district spread that the program is especially designed for children with learning disabilities. No one else attempts it. In another district, a teacher dealing with gifted children only uses the program with outstanding results and the rumor flies that Structure & Style is only for the gifted. No other teacher touches it. When in a private school an all-boys class the

students become enthusiastic writers, the word circulates that it is designed only for boys. Other teachers shun it. Finally, if a regular teacher with a regular class achieves great results, people say, "We've always known that teacher is outstanding." One of my master teachers has this latter problem. Over and over she proclaims, "It's not me. It's the program." The answer: "Oh she is so delightfully modest!" Readers may adjudge the why of these reactions. I have my suspicions.

I began with a query: Why is Structure & Style effective? While I have some scattered ideas about that topic, the question has never really preoccupied my mind. I know it is. What energy is left in my 82 year-old brain devotes itself to trying out new strategies which might be more effective, or might not. Adopt or eliminate. I'm still in the game of trial and error just as I have been for the past 44 years. I want to die playing that game.