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Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil
Aquinas College, Grand Rapids, MI

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Best Practice: Past, Present, and Personal

Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil

*Aquinas College
Grand Rapids, MI*

I was introduced to the phrase *best practice* during my first year as a secondary language arts teacher. In staff meetings and inservices, my principal encouraged me (and my fellow teachers) to use “best practices.” In the midst of these directives, I nodded and smiled, affirming what was likely an administrator’s well-intentioned pep talk. But inwardly, I formed questions: Why hadn’t I heard of *best practice* in my teacher preparation courses? What, exactly, were best practices? And would my definition of best practice match my principal’s?

It is probable that I am not alone: that, at some point in their careers—whether through their education courses, department meetings, administrative mandates, professional literature, or ongoing professional development opportunities—other teachers have heard of best practice. In fact, Margaret Taylor Stewart argues, “we have become obsessed with using the term *best practices* in almost every aspect of our lives,” detailing mental health services, divorce agreements, and bank telling (4). It should come as no surprise that the phrase has increased in popularity in our own dialogue, especially regarding language arts teaching.

So it was with interest that I read a recent issue of *English Journal*, in which English educators Peter Smagorinsky and George Hillocks, Jr. discussed the concept of best practice. While Hillocks emphasized that teachers must be carefully, intentionally trained to employ practices that are deemed “best,” Smagorinsky proposed alternatives to the concept of best practice, favoring “principled practice,” which involves informed sensitivity to students’ cultural, literacy-based and emotional needs, as well as

“reflective practice,” which requires that “a teacher continually considers the effects of instruction on students’ learning, or on whatever other outcomes might be produced through a teaching and learning relationship” (21). However, I argue that we must extend the conversation beyond that of Smagorinsky and Hillocks and consider the historical origins, as well as rhetorical implications, of best practice.

The “Personal Best” Origins of Best Practice

When considering the development of the phrase *best practice*, it may be most helpful to begin with a historical overview of the phrase’s appearance in current practitioner literature. Although it is difficult to definitively say exactly when the phrase “best practice” emerged in educational discourse, a review of scholarly literature suggests that it surfaced most prominently in Chicago during the 1990s when Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels Arthur Hyde collected what was then the “current, national consensus recommendations about ‘best educational practice,’” and gathered “all the traditional knowledge” in order to determine the “best” methods. Zemelman and his colleagues used “neutral,” “non-partisan,” “mainstream” sources to promote “research-based,” “state-of-the-art instruction.” After creating a “sixteen-page tabloid” titled “Best Practice 1,” they desired to distribute it to colleagues and administrators, and thus “printed 55,000 copies, and dropped 570 carefully addressed bundles—one for each school building in the city—on the loading dock at the Board of Education” (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde vii). From such humble beginnings, this short “tabloid” has sold over 400,000 copies and generated a series of articles and books.

Zemelman, Daniels, Hyde and Marilyn Bizar assert that best practice in education is a movement based upon “solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field,” and claim that many of their suggested practices are based on progressivism, utilizing “thirteen interlocking principles.” In fact, they specifically point out that their best practice ideals “can fairly be called a progressive resurgence”

(16). Ultimately, Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde's desire for progressive, best practice approach is to "[turn] the traditional transmission-model classroom upside down: students become active, responsible, and self-motivating learners, while the teacher drops the talking-head role in favor of more powerful functions as model, coach and collaborator" (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde 201). In fact, the movement's roots in progressive thought seems to emphasize a "personal best" mindset, recognizing the varied, individual nature of learning.

The "Absolute Best" Origins of Best Practice

Although Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde advocate for the progressive principles of "best practice," we must acknowledge the phrase's other origins, most notably in the ideas of Frederick Taylor. In 1911, Taylor, a mechanical engineer, wrote *Principles of Scientific Management*, a book theorizing factory management and labor. Taylor observed workmen doing various tasks and then speculated about how tasks could be more perfectly performed, believing that the action of every worker in any job could be "reduced to a science." Insisting on maximum productivity, Taylor wrote, "among the various methods and implements used in each element of each trade there is always one method and one implement which is quicker and better than any of the rest." In other words, if a person had the best workers trained under the best circumstances, working with the best managers, tools, and conditions, it was possible to maximize output. This articulation of "one best way" was revolutionary and introduced the idea of best practice in industry.

But Taylor did not limit these best practices to industry, stating that "fundamental principles of scientific management are applicable to all kinds of human activities, from our simplest individual acts to the work of our great corporations, which call for the most elaborate cooperation." For Taylor, even teaching methods could be engineered to perfection—an absolute best—with the help of science. Such belief in "teaching perfection," in "one best way," are in opposition to the learner-centered sentiments of progressive educational thought; it is this opposition that contributes to a collective confusion about the definition and applications of best practice.

Our Concerns about the Word "Best"

The Taylorist sentiments of best practice, with their "one best way" goals, raise serious concerns; in addition, the word "best" has an air of unquestioning authority, which is problematic given the great complexity of learning language arts skills. Also, language arts teachers address a variety of goals simultaneously, including both skills and content, while working with students with different abilities, knowledge levels, and backgrounds. It is unlikely that any specific best practices, when used formulaically, can "best" serve the needs of every student, or reliably produce specific results, though the recent "highly qualified" rhetoric of No Child Left Behind mandates, emphasis on "scientific" educational research (*viz* the National Reading Panel), and standardized assessments may assume otherwise.

There are further concerns with "best practice." The word "best" implies an "end-of-the-road" approach to teaching, giving an air of finality instead of encouraging teachers to conduct classroom research and find *better* or alternative approaches beyond those suggested by the established best practice experts. For example, what if something better than "literature circles" surfaces in the secondary English classroom? Does this mean that literature circles are no longer "best" in favor of this new approach? Maja Wilson thinks along similar lines, suggesting that "the word *promising* offers the possibility of exploration. The question would no longer be, 'Are you following best practice?' but 'Are you exploring, discovering, and creating practices with promise?'" (xxii). Indeed, there may be more "promise" in the approaches beyond those labeled "best."

Our Collective Knowledge

In my initial experience with best practice, I failed to engage with my colleagues about the definitions, assumptions and applications of the phrase. I said—and questioned—very little. But in light of the Hillocks and Smagorinsky conversation in *EJ*, the rich history of best practice, and said concerns about the concept, I encourage language arts teachers to continue the conversation beyond this brief article:

- In your experiences, when has best practice meant “personal best”?
- When has best practice advocated for more Taylorist, or “one best way,” approaches?
- How do we know when a practice is “best,” according to whom and for what purposes and desired outcomes?
- How can we continue to explore, discover and create effective practice, as Wilson asks?
- And finally, are our existing curricula based on best practice—best practice used in non-formulaic, flexible ways?

It is through this collective dialogue—and a willingness to rethink and revise our teaching approaches—that we may serve our students “best.”

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About the Author

Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil (ghr001@aquinas.edu) recently completed her doctoral studies at Western Michigan University. Her dissertation, titled *Adoption and Integration of Best Practice Methods in Secondary English Teaching*, is a critical examination of the history, rhetorical force, and application of the term “best practice.” She is Assistant Professor of English at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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