Teaching is unusual among professions because it is so ordinary. Everyone knows what teachers do. Most adults observed teachers throughout childhood, and most continue to watch teachers as their children go through school. No other profession is so familiar to us all. Moreover, there is a feeling of timelessness to our observations. We see our children having experiences very like those of our own childhood. School events seem to recur predictably, almost like rituals. Students sit in rows of desks, fill in worksheets, get restless, and look forward to recess. When they are disruptive they are sent to the principal’s office. On parents’ night we all file in and look at children’s artwork.

Why, then, is there a need to study teacher learning? If even ordinary people know all about teaching, and if teaching seems to change so little from generation to generation, what possible questions about teacher learning could be of interest? In fact, it is the relentless sameness of teaching that raises questions, for while most of us feel we know what teaching and schooling are all about, few of us are satisfied with what we know. Just as there is a predictability to classroom life, there is a predictability to efforts to change classroom life. Education reform has become as ordinary as teaching itself. Blue ribbon panels and commissions of all sorts routinely ring alarm bells, decry the situation in education, and call for fundamental changes. The reforms differ in their definition of what is wrong and in their proposed solution, but they all agree that radical and fundamental changes are needed. Yet teaching seems impervious to these proposals.

Most contemporary education reformers want to alter the subject matter that is taught in schools. Virtually all panels and commissions that have studied education in the last decade have argued that school curricula overemphasize memorization and drill at the expense of problem solving and analysis. They argue that students need more rigorous content and that teaching needs to be more intellectually challenging than it has traditionally been. The reform rhetoric argues that students should be learning to work collaboratively in teams, to solve problems, to be flexible and adaptable. Yet traditional teaching practices encourage
students to work in isolation and compete with one another, to learn discrete facts and skills rather than solve complex problems, and to follow fixed routines rather than experiment with novel tasks.

Although the current wave of reform proposals bases its arguments on current events, the demands themselves are not unusual, and efforts to promote similar changes have occurred in the past. In fact, reforms have been so prevalent in the history of education that Larry Cuban (1984) examined the history of teaching in an effort to understand why traditional teaching practice seems so enduring—that is, why it withstood so many attempts at reform. Cuban labeled the constant part of teaching—the part that seems to be repeated with each generation—as “teacher centered.” He also noted that although it seems to be unchanged, it has altered slightly over time. In his study he contrasted these few instances of change with the numerous instances in which change did not occur as a way to test different hypotheses about why teaching practices have remained largely immutable over time. His examination led him to believe that the problem was not one of teacher preparation, nor of teacher incentives, nor of teacher regulation. Instead it derives partly from organizational constraints on practice and partly from teachers’ own beliefs about teaching and learning.

The notion that teachers’ own beliefs and values might be contributing to the stability of practice presents a new challenge to reformers, not many of whom have considered the possibility that change needs to occur within teachers themselves. Instead, both current and past proposals tend to want to change conditions outside the classroom in the hope that these changes will lead to changes inside it. Some reform groups want to change college preparation requirements so that teachers take more subject matter courses. Others would move teacher preparation entirely to the schools. Still others would alter recruitment practices to attract brighter people to the profession. And some would alter the incentives provided to teachers. None of these ideas is new. None has not already been tried. Let us consider for a moment the nature of teaching and the role of teachers’ beliefs.

**SOURCES OF STABILITY IN TEACHING PRACTICES**

One important constraint on teaching, and one reformers can’t change, is the very difficulty of it. Classroom events are remarkably ambiguous. It is often difficult to know how to interpret a particular student’s remark or to discern the sources of confusion that are frustrating a student. Evidence of student learning is obscure at best, and it is
hard for teachers to judge their own success. Sometimes a carefully wrought lesson misfires, and sometimes a hastily thrown together lesson is wildly successful. The nature of teaching practice, then, is such that teachers can be unsure at any given moment what should be done, and can be unsure, once they have done something, of whether their actions were successful.

Moreover, teachers are routinely trying to accomplish multiple and conflicting goals, and this leaves them unsure of which they should attend to in a particular situation and which must be abandoned, even if temporarily. For instance, most teachers perceive a tension between maintaining control over a large number of restless and easily distractible children, and arousing children's interest in school subjects, because children who are excited are also boisterous. Similarly, a student's question, if asked at an inopportune moment, forces the teacher to decide whether to try to keep class activity moving on schedule, or whether instead to give the student the personal attention he or she needs, letting the rest of the class wait before continuing.

The importance of teachers' beliefs is apparent in light of these uncertainties, for teachers draw on their own beliefs and values to interpret the situations they face, to make sense of what happens in their classrooms, and to make decisions about what to do next.

These beliefs, in turn, likely derive from their own childhood experiences in classrooms. So another important contributor to the stability of teaching is its familiarity, its ordinariness. The sociologist Dan Lortie pointed out that teachers go through a lengthy apprenticeship of observation in that they spend their entire childhood observing teachers teach. Lortie suggests that the endurance of traditional teaching practice derives in part from the fact that teachers are highly likely to teach in the way they themselves were taught. Their experiences in primary and secondary schools give them ideas about the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches to teaching and about how they should respond to different types of classroom situations. Perhaps most important, this experience gives them a well-developed but tacit set of assumptions about what is supposed to happen in school. Thus when they begin to teach, they adopt the practices of their former teachers. For example, if their elementary teachers represented the school subject of writing as a set of grammar rules, rather than as a way to organize thoughts and communicate ideas, they will tend to teach writing this way themselves.

These factors, then, combine to foster stability in teaching. The classroom practices we have all seen and the subject matter taught through them endure because they offer teachers a solution to the problem of ambiguous meanings, multiple and conflicting ideas about
what should happen next, and uncertainty about what has already happened.

Teachers reduce their uncertainty by concentrating on things that are easily definable, easily achievable, or easily documentable. They cling to predictable, tried-and-true practices. They avoid giving students thought-provoking work because such tasks enable students to move in too many different directions and hence make classroom life even less predictable. They teach most content only for exposure, rather than for understanding (Porter, 1989) and measure their progress by the number of pages covered rather than by what children actually learned. Sometimes they maintain these practices as a matter of expediency, but often they do so because they learned as children that this is what is supposed to happen at school.

If all teachers draw on their apprenticeship of observation for their ideas about teaching, and if all face uncertainties in their work, then most reform proposals are doomed. Reformers will not improve teachers’ practices by changing the caliber of people who enter the profession, for teachers of all kinds bring the same apprenticeship to their work and face the same uncertainties. Nor can they improve teaching practice by changing the number of course credits teachers are required to take in one subject or another, or by changing the rewards and sanctions that govern teachers. And they cannot reduce the uncertainties of practice, for uncertainty is inherent in the work. Therefore reformers can change teaching practices only by changing the way teachers interpret particular situations, for their responses depend on their interpretations.

But interpretations are also resistant to change, for several reasons. One is that they are so situation specific that they are hard to discuss in the abstract. Another is that teachers may claim to hold one set of beliefs and yet appear to practice another. This can occur because they interpret each particular situation as constraining them or as requiring them to address other, temporary concerns. A teacher may claim, for instance, to believe students should engage in independent problem solving, but continually interpret her own students as not yet ready for such activities. Because of their apprenticeship of observation, teachers are likely to interpret particular situations in the same ways their former teachers did, regardless of the values they claim to hold. To the extent that these traditional interpretations resolve the uncertainties of classroom life, they are difficult to resist.

This is why questions of teacher learning are important. We already know a great deal about how teachers learn traditional practices; what we still don’t know is how teachers can learn different practices—how to interpret particular situations differently and how to respond differently
to the situations they face. The question of how to change teachers’ interpretations of particular situations is at the heart of any effort to move classroom life away from the predictable routines that ordinary people recognize and rarely question.

The most likely place to see such change should be in teacher education programs. These programs are presumably designed to influence teaching practices. Whether they are successful in their task, however, is an open question. In fact, whenever new questions are raised about the quality of teaching in schools, they are quickly followed by new questions about the quality of teacher education programs.

The study described in this book, the Teacher Education and Learning to Teach (TELT) Study, was designed to examine the relationship between teacher education and teacher learning—to see when and under what circumstances eight programs of teacher education were able to influence teachers’ interpretations of and responses to a particular set of predefined classroom situations. Because teacher’s ideas about teaching are formed during childhood, teachers do not enter teacher education as blank slates, but rather as individuals with fully formed ideas about what should happen in classrooms and how teachers and students should behave. My aim in this book, therefore, is as much to examine the ideas that teachers have when they enter teacher education as to see how those ideas change as they participate in it.

STUDYING THE INFLUENCES OF TEACHER EDUCATION

The TELT study tracked changes in teachers’ ideas over time as they participated in eight different teacher education programs and was designed to improve over previous research on teacher education in the following ways.

One problem with previous research is how “teacher education” has been defined. The United States does not have a centralized curriculum for primary or secondary school, or for teacher education. Many states give teacher educators considerable leeway in their program designs. Consequently teacher education programs can look remarkably different from one institution to the next. These differences reflect, among other things, different assumptions about what teachers should learn and about how they can best learn these things. Such variation presents a remarkable research opportunity in that it provides alternative approaches to teacher education whose different influences can be compared. But in fact most research on teacher education has not capitalized on these substantive differences among programs. Instead it
has tended to focus on superficial variations, such as the number of courses teachers take, or the number of hours they spend in schools rather than at the university. By failing to attend to substantive differences among programs, researchers can miss the very aspect of teacher education most likely to influence teacher learning. The TELT study improves upon this practice by purposely selecting programs that were known to have different substantive orientations and different methods for educating teachers and by contrasting programs according to these characteristics rather than simply by the number of credit hours they provide.

The second problem with previous efforts to study the influence of teacher education programs is that researchers have rarely followed teachers over time to see whether or how they change. By examining teachers’ knowledge or ideas only after they have completed their education, researchers cannot determine the extent to which teachers have changed as a result of teacher education or whether the ideas they express were developed years earlier, during their apprenticeships of observation. This is an especially important consideration when one is comparing different approaches to teacher education, for it is possible that different approaches attract teachers with different beliefs and values. If all we can do is describe differences at the end of a program, we are unable to say whether programs created these differences in teachers or whether they merely attracted teachers who were different at the outset. The TELT study surpasses previous research by following teachers from their entry into teacher education through their completion of the programs and shows how their ideas change, if at all, during this period.

Yet a third problem in earlier studies of teacher education lies in their definitions of “outcomes.” Researchers interested in the influence of teacher education have tended to measure the volume of knowledge teachers have accumulated in a particular subject, such as mathematics, educational psychology, or classroom management. But these bodies of knowledge may not help teachers move away from traditional teaching practices. It is not clear that the acquisition of new knowledge, by itself, will necessarily change the way teachers interpret or respond to any particular classroom situations.

Defining the potential influence of teacher education in terms of teachers’ interpretations of events leads me to another problem with previous research, and that is how its outcomes have been documented. When the outcome of interest was accumulated volumes of knowledge, standardized tests were useful measures. As researchers have taken an interest in teachers’ beliefs and values, interviews have become more prominent. (Interviews are useful for learning the values teachers claim
to hold, but it is not clear that teachers use those values to interpret particular situations.) Yet a third approach to documenting change is classroom practice. Observations are more useful for learning how teachers actually respond to classroom situations, but they are less useful for learning why teachers respond in this way—that is, they don't tell us how teachers interpret classroom situations.

In the TELT study, we relied heavily on interviews, but we couched our questions in the context of a set of predefined classroom situations. Each situation permitted numerous interpretations so that teachers could legitimately interpret them as raising different issues or calling for different responses. At the same time, the situations were standardized so that we could see whether teachers' interpretations differed over time and across program contexts.

We have tried to improve upon one other weakness in much research on the relationship between teacher education and learning to teach. In their zeal to generate broad patterns of influence, many researchers have tried to mask the particulars of teaching. Instead of studying the influences of a program on how teachers teach mathematics or writing, for instance, researchers have focused on teacherly behaviors in general, as if the particular subject matter were unimportant. It is possible that this lack of attention to subject matter reflects the curriculum of teacher education, of course. Yet virtually all reform proposals are motivated by a desire to improve the teaching of particular subject matter. The TELT study improves upon other studies of teacher education by setting all interview situations in the context of particular subjects. In this book I focus on situations having to do specifically with teaching writing.

Why writing? First, it is one of the “three r’s,” and as such, is a central subject in the school curriculum. Second, it is taught at virtually every grade level, so that it is possible to study both elementary and secondary teachers' learning about teaching it. Third, there has been a major alteration in thinking in the last few decades about what should be taught in writing and how it should be taught. Prior to the 1960s, there was general agreement that in writing classes students should learn the basic rules of grammar and the basic genre forms. This idea was firmly entrenched not only in teachers' minds, but in the culture as a whole. We used to call primary schools “grammar schools,” a phrase that recognizes basic rules of grammar as the central content not just for writing but for the entire school.

But a variety of events have recently triggered new lines of thinking about writing, and many people in the language arts community argue that the subject of writing needs to be reconceptualized. It needs to be
understood not as a set of prescriptions to follow but as a strategy for organizing one's thoughts and communicating those thoughts to others. Writing, therefore, is a school subject that historically has been dominated by one idea but now is dominated by another. The fact that such a change is under way nationwide makes this a useful subject through which to examine whether or how teachers are able to change their beliefs about writing.

The importance of writing as a school subject, the fact that it is taught at all grade levels, and the recent movement to reform its definition combine to make this particular school subject a useful site for studying teacher learning. Of interest is whether teachers, through their teacher education programs, can not only come to understand new ideas about writing, but also learn to draw on these ideas when they interpret particular classroom situations.

LEARNING TO TEACH WRITING

To examine the relationship between teacher education and teacher learning, we need to consider three issues: the problem of defining writing as a school subject (what is there for teachers to learn about the nature of writing as a school subject), the problem of teaching writing (what is there for teachers to learn about teaching writing), and the problem of influencing teacher learning (what is involved in getting teachers to change their ideas about teaching writing). Let me address each in turn.

The Problem of Defining the School Subject of Writing

Writing has often been described as if it consisted of two incompatible sides. One side, the generative side, mysteriously produces new ideas and wonderful phrases that seem to spring from an unknown source. This side of writing was thought by the ancient Greeks to derive from mystical—even evil—powers (de Romilly, 1975). Where our words come from and how we manage to invent our many and varied compelling stories, moving poems, powerful speeches, and persuasive arguments has never been understood. When writers talk of waiting for a muse, they suggest that they have no control over their own ideas.

The second side entails adherence to a set of shared language conventions. Good ideas cannot be shared with others unless they are conveyed in a language that others can understand. While the first side of writing is mysterious and depends on a muse, the second is often
considered a tedious task of conforming to prescriptions about punctuation, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, placement of prepositional objects, and the like. The value of these prescriptions has been hotly contested, with the two principle arguments summed in two popular expressions: “God is in the details,” and “The devil is in the details!”

In the late nineteenth century, John Genung argued that it was not possible to teach students how to generate written texts, and that therefore the goal for writing instruction should be those aspects of writing that could be taught: conventions of punctuation, grammar, and language usage (quoted in Young, 1982). Genung’s ideas had a lasting effect on the curriculum. English teachers and other keepers of the language have compiled rules and precedents about language and language usage and have presented this codified knowledge in textbooks, manuals, and orderly lectures. They have developed worksheets, exercises, and other sorts of activities to help students practice and master these conventions. The side of writing that has guided writing instruction, then, was the prescriptive side.

But reformers today are pressing for more attention to strategy and purpose. They point out that writing differs from other school subjects in that it is an inherently purposeful and inherently social activity and that excessive attention to prescriptions not only ignores the purpose and context for writing but may even inhibit students from wanting to write. Students’ anxiety over compliance with prescriptions can divert their attention from their own purposes toward a concern for adhering to the rules. One recent writer, Aviva Freedman, provides an especially cogent example of the idea that formal properties of texts cannot be taught (1993). She begins with a premise similar to Genung’s, that the process of generating texts is mysterious. But rather than defining the mystery as depending on a muse, Freedman believes it depends on social contexts: writing is done in response to particular social situations and the rules for producing texts are picked up tacitly through our participation in these social situations. So whereas Genung concluded that the process of writing could not be taught but that the standards could, Freedman concludes that it is the standards that cannot be taught explicitly. Instead they must be picked up tacitly in context. Law students, for instance, learn to write legal texts not by formally studying their features but by being immersed in law situations where the expectations for form and function are tacitly gleaned from the context. Freedman concludes that form and genre can be learned in context but cannot be abstracted out of those contexts and articulated.

If we were to accept the traditional idea that the subject matter of writing consists mainly of prescriptions, then the task facing writing
teachers would be to determine which of these prescriptions was most important to introduce to students, and in what sequence. Teachers would need to be knowledgeable enough about the prescriptions to determine which logically precede others, which are most likely to be understandable to students just now, and which might be most difficult for students.

If, on the other hand, we were to view writing as strategic and purposeful, then the teachers' task would be to provide authentic, meaningful writing projects for students so that through these projects students could discover the forms and conventions that best suited their purposes. But authentic projects would likely require different amounts of time, different uses of the library, or different kinds of guidance from others. This ideal would seriously complicate teachers' classroom management.

There is a third way of defining the school subject of writing: in addition to strategies and conventions, there are a number of concepts students need to understand—genre, metaphor, chronology, and so forth. If we were to define the subject matter of writing as consisting mainly of concepts, then the teachers' task would be to decide which concepts would be most likely to help students improve their texts. Concepts offer authors broad approaches to organizing and representing ideas. Those who press for a curriculum of concepts might be less concerned about students' ability to comply with prescriptions and to intuit the best strategies for achieving their purposes, and more concerned about students' understanding of important concepts and their ability to use these concepts as they write.

In the pages that follow, I distinguish three main ideas about the nature of the school subject of writing. One, the most traditional, is that the subject matter is largely prescriptive. Therefore we want our students to know which nouns to capitalize; how to use quotation marks, periods, and commas; which verb forms to use with different sentence structures; and so forth. The second idea is that the subject matter is largely conceptual. Therefore we want students to understand concepts such as metaphor, chronology, argument, and genre in ways that enable them to appreciate the quality of texts they read and to use these concepts to analyze and improve their own texts. The third idea is that the subject matter of writing is largely strategic and purposeful. Therefore we want students to be familiar and comfortable with the ways in which their ideas are generated and transformed into texts and to be able to use the process of writing to refine and clarify their thinking.

Each of these ideas has merit, and each represents a distinct aspect
of the subject matter of writing. I refer to these ideas as aspects of writing, rather than as topics about writing, because virtually all topics in writing can be represented as consisting of any one of these aspects. Consider the topic of paragraphs, for instance. Paragraphs are central to writing, and every student must learn about them. But what exactly should they learn? They could learn a set of prescriptions like these: make sure you indent the paragraph by five typed spaces or by one finger knuckle, and make sure the paragraph has at least three sentences. Or they could learn some concepts, such as “main idea,” “supporting details,” and “transitions.” Or they could learn how to use paragraphs strategically to accomplish their purposes. Journalists tend to use very short paragraphs, for instance, while academics tend to use very long ones. Sometimes writers form a paragraph with just one sentence because it makes that sentence stand out. Any topic about writing can be represented through any aspect of the subject.

This point about the different aspects of writing is important because it shows us that the problem of teaching writing cannot be solved simply by dictating a curriculum. Even if teachers follow curriculum guides, they still must interpret each curriculum topic as consisting mainly of prescriptions, mainly of concepts, or mainly of strategies and purposes. These interpretations enable teachers to decide whether they will give students practice exercises, whether they will show students examples of main ideas in other writers’ texts, or whether they will encourage students to experiment with their own texts.

Though the prescriptive aspect of writing still dominates popular ideas about writing and dominates the practices of many teachers, research on teaching writing supports both conceptual and strategic interpretations of writing, and some teachers have changed their thinking on this issue. Research has demonstrated (Hillocks, 1986) that direct instruction is less effective than pedagogies that give students more control over their writing (an argument for teaching the strategies and processes of writing), and that instruction in prescriptive content such as grammar and punctuation is less beneficial than instruction in the criteria by which texts are evaluated and in specific strategies for organizing and managing different kinds of information (an argument for teaching concepts that students can use to describe and analyze written texts).

Each of these ideas has validity in the sense that each captures an important aspect of writing. Yet none alone is sufficient. And while few reformers would argue that their ideas should be the only ideas in the classroom, all believe theirs are the most important. So as with all re-
forms, teachers are left with the task of interpreting each situation they face and deciding whether they should be concerned about prescriptions, concepts, or strategies.

The Problem of Teaching Writing

In the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, reformers have wanted teachers to help students learn strategic processes that enable them to achieve their purposes. They have wanted to replace repetitive exercises in language usage with meaningful projects that enabled students to develop strategies for generating text, to learn to think about real audiences, and to learn to solve myriad problems associated with writing to those audiences.

Such a goal would be difficult for most teachers to implement, even if they were persuaded that this aspect of writing was important, for it would require teachers not only to alter the content they teach, but to change their approaches to classroom management and interpersonal relations. Most teachers consider a well-managed classroom to be one in which students are quiet and do not disturb one another. This ideal is threatened when students are allowed to share drafts with one another and to comment on one another’s papers, for such activities mean there is more noise in the classroom and more opportunity for students to talk about nonsubstantive issues. Classroom events are less predictable and teachers’ control over them more tenuous. So even when teachers claim to agree with reformers, they may still interpret many particular situations as calling for more controlling responses.

Reformers’ ideas may also require teachers to alter the personas they adopt in the classroom. Teachers often depend on their personal authority and expertise to define themselves in relation to their students. Yet reformers would have students decide for themselves what direction they want their writing to take. In fact, David Bartholomae (1986) has suggested that administrators and teachers are often afraid to acknowledge strategies and purpose in writing because the very possibility of independent student activity calls into question the authority of existing knowledge, and at the same time, the authority of the teacher and of the school. To the extent that a teacher’s self-concept depends on whether he or she is recognized as an authoritative source, that teacher may avoid the strategic and purposive aspect of writing in favor of its prescriptions.

Changing authority relations is no simple matter. Even when teachers are willing to cede authority to students, students may sway too easily to the teacher’s point of view. Because teachers have tacit author-
ity in the classroom anyway, because they will necessarily, eventually, have to grade student efforts, and because students, as novices, are unsure of themselves, students might be quick to abandon their own ideas in favor of whatever they think the teacher thinks they should be doing. As soon as the teacher provides any form of guidance, the student is likely to perceive this as authoritative direction. At that moment the teacher's purpose is imposed on the writing and replaces the student's purpose.

Teachers may also find it difficult to facilitate students' purposes for writing when they look at their students' papers and see numerous grammatical and mechanical errors. They may interpret such situations as raising questions about students' ability to comply with prescriptions and may fear that too much attention to strategies and purposes might leave students unable to produce texts that meet the criteria employers and others will apply. Thus there is a tension between the need to provide students with authentic writing situations and the need to ensure that students learn particular concepts and prescriptions they need to know.

Yet balancing these different aspects of writing is important, for an overemphasis on any one aspect of writing can do a disservice to children and can devolve easily into no instruction at all. An overemphasis on prescriptions renders writing meaningless to students, encouraging them to comply with forms that have no apparent purpose, while an overemphasis on strategy and purpose can create students who feel good about themselves but in fact know very little. Harvey Graff (1987) has suggested that errors of the first sort—efforts to assure that students can comply with prescriptions—often occur because teachers confuse substantive and management ideals. In their zeal to manage student behavior, teachers make authority become the central motif in the classroom. On the other side, Lisa Delpit (1986, 1988) has argued that errors of the second sort—efforts to help students generate texts that serve their own purposes—can prevent underclass children, in particular, who lack the tacit grammatical knowledge of upper classes, from learning the essential communication tools they need to interact with social groups who have power. Either idea, then, if pursued without regard for the other, can dissolve into a pedagogy that denies children the ability to write well.9

Since all three aspects of writing represent important ideas, the challenge to teachers is to make writing meaningful by encouraging students to write about things that interest them and at the same time to insert important concepts about writing into their thinking and provide important prescriptions. The subject of writing therefore provides a
painfully vivid example of the general problem of managing the uncertainty that arises from competing ideals. It is a good context in which to ask, “Can formal teacher education programs encourage teachers to interpret particular classroom situations differently?”

The Problem of Learning to Teach Writing

This particular moment in history is an interesting one in which to ask how teachers can learn different ideas about teaching writing. Despite the advances this reform has made, most teachers are still more familiar with writing prescriptions than with writing strategies. Because of their apprenticeship of observation, they are familiar with the prescriptive approach to teaching writing even before they are formally taught anything about teaching writing. If teacher educators want to influence teachers’ practices, they must confront two major impediments to learning. One has to do with teachers’ preconceptions about the nature of the subject matter and the other with their preconceptions about their role in promoting learning.

Teachers enter their professional education already trapped in their own relationship with the subject. Many learned as children to equate writing with grammar, punctuation, and usage. The notion that writing might entail more demanding concepts, such as genre or rhetorical devices, may still be unfamiliar to them, as would be the notion that writing might entail strategies for thinking, for formulating ideas, and for participating in society by communicating with, influencing, or entertaining others.

As to their role in promoting student learning, teachers may not have experienced meaningful writing projects themselves and consequently may not appreciate the writing problems their students face. Nor will they have observed other teachers helping students with those problems. They won’t know how teachers are supposed to talk to students about their texts or what kinds of interpersonal relationships to establish. They won’t know how to diagnose student learning, respond to students needs, engage students, support students, and extend students’ thinking and writing. When they see student papers with grammatical errors, they will feel compelled to correct them. All these difficulties will encourage them to revert to the traditional prescriptive aspect of writing, for it offers a method for keeping students busy, controlling the flow of activity in the classroom, and feeling successful. Is it possible, then, for formal teacher education to promote a different approach to teaching writing?
Arguments about the merits of teacher education programs have existed almost as long as the programs themselves, and many efforts have been made to settle the matter through research. But for a variety of reasons it has proved to be very difficult to discern the influences of teacher education. One problem is that teacher education includes at least two distinct parts. There are courses in the academic disciplines—history, literature, mathematics, and science—as well as courses in education. Most researchers, and most university faculty, assume that the disciplinary portion of teachers’ education provides the subject matter that will be taught and that the education portion provides knowledge of such related topics as child psychology and classroom management. When reformers feel that teachers’ ideas about subject matter are wrong or inadequate, they tend to believe that the road to improvement in teacher education is to limit the number of courses in education and to increase the number of courses in the disciplines. However, the amount of knowledge teachers hold about a given subject may not alter their beliefs about the nature of that subject, and it is these beliefs that influence them in the classroom. In fact, since teachers formulate their ideas about school subjects during childhood, it is likely that teachers with more courses in English will hold the same prescriptive ideas as teachers with fewer.

Education faculty, on the other hand, often accept the notion that because subject matter is taught outside their department, they should teach content that is unrelated to subject matter. So they concentrate on nonsubstantive issues—how to organize classrooms and discipline students, how to communicate with students’ parents, or how to identify handicapping conditions. Teacher educators who do try to offer alternative ideas about school subjects are likely to find themselves limited to a single course in which to instill these new ideas. For writing, this single course is likely to be called “methods for teaching language arts,” and it may need to address not only writing but also reading and literature. With a limited amount of time available, teacher educators may confine themselves to reciting platitudes because they don’t have time to illustrate how those platitudes translate into any particular teaching situations.

Moreover, not all teacher educators seek to influence teachers’ ideas about school subjects. Despite repeated school reform movements, most of which are based in concern about subject matter, many
teacher education programs continue to orient their curriculum around non-subject matter issues such as classroom management, discipline, and the like. Consequently what teachers actually learn about teaching writing can differ dramatically from one institution to the next, and even from one course to another within an institution. This unusual situation enables us to ask what teachers and teacher candidates actually learn—both about writing and about teaching writing—from these different substantive orientations toward teacher education.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

I have two goals. First, I want to illuminate the ideas that guide teachers’ interpretations of and responses to a particular set of classroom situations; and second, I want to show the ways in which teacher education programs influence these interpretations and responses.

The first goal is important because teachers do not enter their education programs as blank slates, but instead, come in with deeply ingrained ideas about how they expect themselves and their future students to engage in the joint processes of teaching and learning. It is not possible to consider the real or potential influence of teacher education without taking into account these preexisting ideas.

The second goal is important because education has experienced a sequence of reforms, many of which have been intended to change classroom practice from the traditional grammar school ideal to a more intellectually engaging enterprise. These reforms have had only minimal influence on practice. Since formal teacher education programs provide the most labor-intensive efforts to influence teachers, it seems important to learn whether these programs have any influence on teachers. In the pages that follow, I compare the influences of two groups of programs. One group is oriented toward traditional teacher education topics such as classroom management; these programs tend to reinforce the traditional grammar school ideal. The other group is oriented toward reform ideas of school subject matter; these programs seek to move traditional practice toward the approaches I described above.

My first goal, of illuminating the ideas that guide teachers’ interpretations of and responses to particular classroom situations, required me to devise a taxonomy to categorize the variety of ideas teachers expressed. The taxonomy is shown in figure 1.1. Because my original interest was in teachers’ ideas about the school subject of writing, the first three entries in the taxonomy refer to these aspects of writing.
Figure 1.1. Ideas That Can Guide the Teaching of Writing

Ideas about the nature of the subject matter
1. Ensure that children learn to comply with language prescription such as grammar, punctuation, and usage
2. Ensure that children understand important concepts like voice, alliteration, chronology, and metaphor
3. Ensure that students learn strategic processes such as drafting, revising, and editing, to pursue their own purposes

Ideas about classroom management
1. Keep everyone quiet and orderly
2. Keep everyone busy and entertained
3. Keep everyone curious and intellectually engaged

Ideas about interpersonal relations
1. Be warm and caring
2. Be authoritative and knowledgeable
3. Be respected
4. Be enthusiastic

When I began the study, I wanted to know whether teachers' ideas about the nature of the subject matter could change as a result of their teacher education programs. But since teacher education programs and teachers themselves think about other issues as well, my taxonomy had to capture those issues too. The second group of ideas, ideas about classroom management, is included because these ideas were of interest to the traditional programs participating in the TELT study. Not only do these programs concern themselves with classroom management and organization; teachers must as well. The third group of ideas in the taxonomy includes teachers' ideas about interpersonal relations. This area turned out to be very important to the teachers participating in the TELT study. Even though I was interested in their ideas about subject matter, and many programs were interested in their ideas about classroom management, the teachers themselves were more likely to be concerned about interpersonal relationships, particularly with respect to the kind of personas they should adopt in the classroom.

These three areas of interest can easily be distinguished, as they are
in the taxonomy, but they are not independent of one another. Any given classroom situation requires teachers to consider all three simultaneously—as they interpret classroom events and decide how to respond to them, they decide which aspect of the subject matter they will try to teach, how order will be maintained in the classroom, and what persona they will adopt at this moment. Moreover, the goals they adopt in one area may require them to compromise their ideas in another. For instance, a teacher may decide in a particular situation that she needs to sacrifice subject matter, at least for the moment, in favor of assuring that order is maintained in the classroom. Or she may abandon the idea of presenting a knowledgeable and authoritative persona in a particular situation in favor of helping students develop their own purposes for writing. Each situation requires judgment, which is why teachers’ interpretations of situations are so important. In fact the interaction, and often competition, among these many ideas adds to the ambiguity of teaching.

One of the things I will show in this book is that the ideas teachers embraced when they were asked to discuss general issues in teaching and learning were different from those they embraced when interpreting particular situations. The differences were so striking that I felt a need to use different terminology to refer to each. I use the term “ideals,” or “espoused ideals,” to refer to teachers’ general values regarding teaching or about learning, and I use the term “immediate concerns” to refer to the ideas they embrace in particular situations. Both espoused ideals and immediate concerns can be analyzed using the taxonomy in figure 1.1. That is, teachers may espouse as ideals any of the ideas listed there, or they may mention any of them as immediate concerns in particular situations.

The reason this distinction is important is that there were substantial differences between teachers’ espoused ideals and their immediate concerns. One difference appeared in their ideas about themselves as teachers; another appeared in their ideas about student learning. In the case of themselves as teachers, many teachers espoused an ideal of caring, saying that they wanted to be nice to their students, to demonstrate understanding and sympathy, and to ensure that students felt safe in school. But when they were faced with the particular situations we presented, this ideal rarely appeared. Instead, teachers’ immediate concerns were to ensure that the students complied with their lesson formats or with some set of writing prescriptions.

The second difference between ideals and immediate concerns appeared when we discussed the topic of teaching students to organize their writing. When asked about what students should know or would
find hard to learn, teachers seemed to be concerned about all three aspects of writing: prescriptions, concepts, and strategies and purposes. But when they faced a particular disorganized student paper, they were primarily concerned about how well the student complied with prescriptions.

There appeared to be a tendency for teachers to become increasingly more concerned about students' compliance with prescriptions as they moved closer and closer to the action of the situation. When they thought about teaching and learning in general, they rarely thought about prescriptions. When they interpreted the particular situations we presented, they were much more likely to be concerned about the students' compliance with prescriptions. And when they formulated responses to these situations, they were even more likely to be concerned about prescriptions than they had been when they had first interpreted the situations. Each type of question moved teachers closer to the situation, and each increased teachers' concerns about prescriptions.

One of my principal findings, therefore, is that these teachers were more likely to interpret the situations we presented as raising concerns about prescriptions than as raising concerns about any other aspect of the subject matter. For those who are aware of the strength and duration of the current reform movement in writing, this finding may come as a surprise, but for those who are aware of the history of failed education reforms and of the stubborn stability of traditional teaching practices in this country, this finding should be expected.

What makes teachers' concerns about prescriptions especially interesting is that teachers were not very interested in the prescriptions themselves. In a situation that involved a grammatical convention, for instance, none showed any intellectual interest in the nuances of grammatical rules. And in a situation that presented a bored student, many conceded that schoolwork was indeed boring. At the same time, they often associated expertise in prescriptions with their own personas, believing both that it was important for them to maintain authority in the classroom and that their authority depended on their expertise in prescriptions. Thus their concerns about prescriptions derived not just from their beliefs about the nature of writing, but also from their beliefs about how school works: school is an event in which teachers make children do things that are often tedious, but it is the teacher's job to set the rules and the student's job to comply. The strength and resilience of their concern about prescriptions, then, derives at least partly from its association with ideas about classroom management and ideas about maintaining authority in the classroom.
The pervasiveness of teachers' immediate concerns with prescriptions and with maintaining authority puts a new cast on teachers' widespread espousal of caring as an ideal. On closer examination, we will see that their notion of caring was not one in which the teacher tried to understand the student's point of view, nor one in which the teacher tried to alleviate a student's discomfort or even tried to understand a student's point of view. Instead, it was conditioned on the assumption that the teacher was the authority in a classroom, and they wanted to be at least benevolent in their exercise of authority.

In fact, in the particular situations we presented, teachers showed a marked tendency not to try to discern the student's point of view. Even though teachers frequently espoused an ideal of caring for students, and even though some of the situations we presented invited a diagnosis of a student's intentions or concerns, teachers rarely engaged in such a diagnosis. It is difficult to know, with the interviews we used, whether teachers failed to diagnose student intentions because they were unable to do so or because they were uninterested in doing so. It is likely, though, that their concerns about maintaining their authority in the classroom and about assuring compliance with prescriptions combined to reduce the likelihood that teachers would try to discern a student's point of view.

This complex of ideas traps teachers in a traditional grammar school ideal. Their ideas about the teacher's role in the classroom, about the students as learners, and about the nature of the subject matter itself compliment one another and combine to reinforce traditional practices. These mutually reinforcing ideas are present in teachers even before they enter teacher education programs. The presence of these ideas raises the question of whether teachers who are trapped in traditional practices can learn different ideas about teaching writing.

The particular different idea contemporary reformers want teachers to learn is that writing consists of strategies and purposes as much as (if not more than) prescriptions. But if teachers are to learn to teach this aspect of writing, they must be willing to discern student purposes and to facilitate those purposes, something they are not inclined to do. So the interconnection among these ideas about subject matter, classroom management, and interpersonal relations means that reform-minded teacher educators will have a difficult time changing teachers' thinking. They cannot simply focus on the aspect of the subject matter they think is most important but must instead persuade teachers to reconsider the entire complex of interconnected ideas.

But of course, not all teacher education programs are interested in altering this complex of ideas. Many reinforce it. I divided the programs
participating in the TELT study according to whether they focused on the traditional themes of classroom management and associated topics, or reflected reformer's ideas. Reform-oriented programs directly addressed the teaching of school subjects such as writing, while traditional programs tended to focus on matters of management, discipline, and child development.

The single most important finding from this study is that these substantive orientations made a difference. Teachers who participated in traditional management-oriented programs became even more concerned about prescriptions by the end of their programs than they had been in the beginning, while teachers in reform-oriented programs reduced their concerns about prescriptions and increased their concerns about students' strategies and purposes. The influences were not universal, or often dramatic, but they were consistent enough and sizable enough to warrant attention. And virtually all of the changes in teachers' interpretations of these particular situations were consistent with the programs' substantive orientation.

So the substance of teacher education makes a difference. This is important news, for most research on teacher education has focused on structural rather than substantive features of programs: the number of required courses, for instance, or whether the courses are provided at the university or in the schools. While I found some modest differences between university-based and field-based teacher education programs, the most noticeable and most important differences were between programs with different substantive orientations.

I also found that programs had two very different types of influence on teachers. In some cases they influenced teachers by changing their interpretations of or responses to these situations. I consider such changes to represent evidence of teacher learning. In other cases, programs did not change teachers' ideas, but they did recruit teachers whose ideas were already compatible with the program's orientation. When programs enroll teachers whose initial ideas are noticeably different from those of other beginning teachers, I consider the program to have influenced the field of teaching as a whole simply by bringing a particular type of people into the profession. I call this an enrollment influence, as distinct from a learning influence.

Interestingly, all of the examples of enrollment influences were consistent with the programs' substantive orientations, just as all the examples of learning influences were. Most of them appeared in two types of programs. In one case the teacher education program was offered by an open-enrollment institution which attracted many less well prepared students and students from lower socioeconomic classes. Because the
institution as a whole enrolled more of these students, the teacher education program also enrolled more of these students. And these students were far more concerned about prescriptions than were students entering other teacher education programs. The second situation with noticeable enrollment influences involved two programs which provided continuing education for teachers rather than initial preparation. Teachers who enrolled in these programs already had their teaching credentials, so their reason for enrolling was not to obtain a credential but to enhance their practice. They therefore selected programs whose substantive orientation suited their own beliefs about teaching and learning. Both of these were reform-oriented programs, and both enrolled teachers who were already more concerned about the strategies and purposes of writing than about its prescriptions.

I should also mention that the TELT study included two alternative routes into teaching. These routes are the result of recent policy initiatives designed to recruit either more or different people into teaching, often under the assumption that these different types of people will be more able to break away from traditional grammar school practices and create a more intellectually rigorous approach to teaching. Actually, these two alternative routes only rarely enrolled teachers who were noticeably different from teachers entering other programs and only rarely influenced teachers’ learning. Their recruits tended to be concerned mainly about prescriptions when they entered these programs and to continue to be concerned mainly about prescriptions when they completed them. If these programs were successful in enlisting different types of people into teaching, then, the differences were not apparent in their interpretations of these particular situations.

One further point about program influences is that in these particular situations, programs usually had more influence on teachers’ immediate concerns than on teachers’ ideals. This finding may seem surprising, in that a frequent complaint about teacher education is that it is too abstract and not very applied. Some critics might claim programs are imparting too much abstract knowledge, for instance, without helping teachers think about their role as teachers or about the nature of the subject matter. Other critics might claim that teacher education programs offer platitudes about teaching but don’t help teachers translate them into particular practices. If either of these things were true, we would not see much program influence on teachers’ interpretations of these particular situations. But we did.

In the chapters that follow, I describe these findings in more detail. I describe teachers’ ideas about writing and teaching writing when they...
Enter their programs and show how their ideas changed over time. The evidence I draw on comes from interviews in which teachers were asked to interpret and respond to a series of hypothetical classroom situations.

In chapter 2 I describe the programs that participated in this study, focusing in particular on their content. Programs differ in many ways, but the difference that is of most interest to me is their substantive orientation. Some programs concentrate on teaching traditional topics such as classroom management strategies; others try to introduce their students to the contemporary reform ideal—to persuade them that writing is a strategic text-generating process that depends on one’s purpose and that the teacher’s role is to facilitate student purposes by providing students with authentic contexts for writing, guiding them, and raising questions as they plan, organize, or revise their thinking.

In chapter 3 I describe the teachers who participated in this study and the ideals they espoused when they entered their teacher education programs. I describe their childhood memories of teachers and their notions of what makes a teacher “good.” I then describe their responses to a hypothetical bored student. While answers to earlier questions reveal teachers’ ideals, the bored student question brings out their immediate concerns as they interpret and devise responses to this particular situation. The bored student situation can be interpreted as raising a concern about subject matter (“The student does not appreciate the importance of this content; I must either reconsider its value or work harder to make its value apparent”), a concern about classroom management (“The student’s question comes at an inopportune time; I’ve got to find a way to move the class back to the task at hand”), or an interpersonal concern (“The student is either challenging my authority or pleading for sympathy. I’ve got to respond appropriately”). In chapter 3 I describe teachers’ interpretations of and proposed responses to the bored student.

In chapters 4 through 6 I show how teachers changed over time in their interpretations of and proposals for responding to several types of teaching tasks. In chapter 4 I show their impulses when confronted with a particular student paper. As novices, student writers are likely to err in their use of language, to be unclear in their purpose, and to be clumsy in their efforts to articulate ideas. The paper we presented showed evidence of all of this, but it also contained evidence of a student misconception. Teachers were concerned primarily about the student’s compliance with prescriptions; almost none diagnosed the student’s intention. In chapter 4 I show how they interpreted and responded to this situation at the beginning of their teacher education programs and how their
interpretations changed over time as they participated in these programs.

In chapter 5 I describe teachers’ thinking about a particular curriculum topic: organization. Organization is also a good site for examining the tension among prescriptive, conceptual, and strategic aspects of writing: on one hand, organizational decisions are highly personal and highly purpose specific; on the other, numerous prescriptions have been written to help novices organize their texts—the three parts of a paragraph, for instance, and the five-paragraph essay format. And there are important concepts that can be used to organize texts as well—concepts such as chronology, main idea, and flashback. Teachers discussed their ideas about what was important in general for students to learn about organization, and they also responded to a particular situation—a student paper that was poorly organized. Chapter 5 reveals both teachers’ espoused ideals with respect to organization and their immediate concerns about organization in a particular situation, thus enabling us to compare the influence of teacher education on both sources of teachers’ ideas.

In chapter 6 I show how teachers responded to a student who asked what the appropriate verb form is when none is the subject of a sentence. This question offers a useful contrast to the question about organization posed in chapter 5. Organization and subject-verb agreement represent, respectively, macrolevel and microlevel problems in writing. They also differ in the extent to which prescriptions seem called for: organization is related to the ultimate goal of the text and to the student’s nascent ideas of purpose, while verb choices are dictated largely by language conventions. Yet neither is solely the province of one aspect of writing, for there are prescriptions for organization and there are considerations of audience and purpose involved in selecting an appropriate verb. Teachers must decide which aspect of the subject to attend to when faced with such a student, and I show their decisions in chapter 6.

In chapter 7 I summarize the evidence that has been presented in the preceding chapters and tie it all together.