

Ann B. Dobie

## ORTHOGRAPHY REVISITED: A RESPONSE TO KRISTINE ANDERSON

In the Fall 1987 *JBW*, Kristine Anderson argues with my proposals for a short course in spelling that can be carried out in the context of a freshman composition course. Her argument does more to support my recommendations than criticize them. Our points of agreement are several and fundamental; sometimes we not only advocate the same principles and strategies, but even express them in the same language. Because I am pleased to have the opportunity to restate some of the significant aspects of teaching spelling, let me list a few that Professor Anderson and I seem to hold in common. As I read her essay, we agree on the following:

1. English orthography is complex, but it follows a more orderly pattern than was once assumed.
2. Because most poor spellers have not intuitively absorbed the basic principles underlying the spelling of many words, they are unable to recognize their problems or solve them.
3. Students profit from looking for patterns in their mistakes, then adopting, adapting, and planning strategies for dealing with them. As I stated in my essay, "If students discover their own mistakes and the reason for a particular spelling, they will adopt the correct spelling more quickly."
4. Instructors must provide students with guidance and instruction to give them the means to deal with their problems.
5. Spelling is not simply a low-order memory task, but a highly complex and active intellectual accomplishment.
6. Instruction in spelling should take place in the context of general language study, allowing students the opportunity to explore connections between the spoken language and the written form and to discover how they can apply that knowledge.

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If I have accurately noted the basic assumptions that Professor Anderson and I share, it becomes clear that our differences have more to do with emphasis than with substance. Specifically, she takes issue with three aspects of my course: (1) it includes too little explanation of error analysis by students; (2) it suggests using learning techniques that involve the auditory sense; (3) it recommends strategies that she described as “low-order memory tasks.” Let me briefly comment on each point.

The short course I have described begins, grows out of, and ends with each student’s analysis of his or her own errors. It starts with a diagnostic test made up of words that have been drawn from student papers. It develops with class discussion of patterns of error. It concludes with individualized tests composed of words the students themselves have deemed to be troublesome. I acknowledge that the students are asked to examine words exemplifying specific types of problems (homonyms, affixes, consonant alteration) along with techniques for avoiding errors; I further acknowledge that such direction on the part of the instructor reduces the initial involvement of the students in analyzing their work. The procedure is, however, designed to facilitate learning, to help students find “a systematic reason why a word should be spelled the way it is,” and to discover “regularities” of correct spelling as well as patterns of misspelling. As I stated in my essay, while spelling improvement must be arrived at inductively, instructors should make the process as efficient and productive as possible.

In answer to Anderson’s charge that developing the auditory sense of students is an inappropriate approach for poor spellers who often err by relying on “how words sound,” let me point out that I said that the study of phonics will not solve all problems, and I recommended its use “to some small extent in classroom work, if only to heighten students’ awareness of what they are saying and hearing” (Fall 1986 *JBW*, 46). If instructors can *improve* students’ sense of the correspondence between sound and words, then the effort will not have been wasted.

As for the “skill and drill” aspect of my proposed course, I confess to being found guilty—if that is the term Professor Anderson chooses for practical strategies that instructors can give students to use on their own over a long period of time. I cannot take the charge as a very serious one, however, because Anderson recommends many of the same strategies in her article. Several of the “appropriate activities and instruction” that she lists are identical to the “skills and drills” she finds in my proposal to be “low-order memory tasks that involve repetition.” For example, we both discuss the advantages of work that helps students make connections between words with similar patterns, apply appropriate rules *when called for*, develop their visual memories, integrate acquisition of spelling skills with other writing tasks and language study, and use mnemonic devices. Anderson’s charge is further deflated when she suggests the use of “flashcards of demon words.” I can think of no drill that is more repetitive and of a lower order.

One final word: the spelling survey included by Professor Anderson is a welcome device for helping students and teachers diagnose spelling deficiencies. It asks important questions and should elicit helpful results. With her permission, I intend to use it. It should fit in comfortably with my short course on spelling.