Striking a Balance: Using Critical Andragogy to Improve Writing Proficiency among Adult Learners: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Because adult students are returning to college in record numbers, instructors must prepare to position these non-traditional students for academic success. One area in need of immediate attention is writing proficiency. The researchers present the findings of a pilot study in which they gathered data on adult students’ perceptions of themselves as writers. The researchers contend that one important aspect of enhanced student learning is the integration of self-directed learning activities into the instructional techniques. To support this contention the authors situate the findings of the pilot study within the context of scholarship from composition studies and adult learning theory. After analysis of the data and reflections on past teaching practices, the researchers offer practical recommendations for facilitating student learning through the strategic implementation of the instructional model of self-directed learning.

Key words: Adult learners, self-directed learning, writing proficiency, instructional methods

Introduction

Increasing numbers of adult students are returning to college. Some are seeking to complete degrees that they began years ago. Others need a Bachelor’s degree to be eligible for a promotion on their jobs. Still others have a desire to fulfill a dream of attending college. Whatever their motivations, non-traditional adult students are becoming the norm on college and university campuses throughout the nation. As instructors, we must prepare ourselves to position these adult learners to succeed. Achieving this goal, however, may be more challenging than it appears, because non-
traditional students (whom we refer to as adult learners--individuals 25 years old or older, who are financially independent, and the head of a household) are not a monolithic group. They arrive on campus (or in online courses) with diverse educational backgrounds, diverse motivations for attending, and perhaps most significantly diverse skill sets, which must be addressed. The same is certainly true for traditional undergraduate students (17-22 year old students who come to college immediately following high school); however, non-traditional students are unique in that their family and work obligations often prevent them from taking advantage of programs and resources that are often geared toward and scheduled for students who live on campus or for students who have the flexibility to partake in summer bridge programs which are not feasible for most working adults.

With this reality in mind, it is necessary for faculty members to carefully consider the best practices for helping adult learners succeed and achieve their educational goals. Helping to improve adult students’ written communication skills is one area that warrants immediate attention. To help address this critical need and fill the intellectual gap, there are some relevant questions which must be posed: Who are the adult students enrolled in courses? How do they define themselves as learners? What are their reading and writing habits? When writing deficiencies are evident, what are the most effective approaches to take to help them improve their proficiency in Standard American English? These questions served as the foundation for the pilot study “Striking a Balance: Using Critical Andragogy to Improve Writing Proficiency among Adult Learners”. This study was designed to generate theory and practice-based recommendations for instructors interested in developing teaching strategies that facilitate student learning and promote students’ transformation into self-directed learners.

Literature Review

“Teaching people to write is one of the chronic problems of American education,” proclaims Eble (as cited in White, 1994, xi). The problem that Eble identifies is one that plagues educators at all levels and across disciplinary lines, and the teachers of adults are not an exception. When considering which teaching strategies are most appropriate and/or most effective in helping adults improve their writing proficiency, instructors may glean insights from composition studies and adult education scholars. At this disciplinary intersection it becomes quite clear that there are theories and principles in both fields of study which could be combined to enhance the learning and teaching exchange between adult college students and their instructors.

The most obvious point of departure for an investigation such as this is in the realm of composition studies. Because teaching writing is indeed a difficult task, efforts to improve students’ writing proficiency have generated countless journal articles, academic conferences, books and, major research studies. These studies of student writing and college level writing instruction shed some important light on the issue of teaching writing to adults. The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing, which is co-edited by Glenn, Goldthwaite, and Conner (2003), is a popular resource for writing instructors. In this text, the editors provide novice and more experienced writing instructors with detailed chapters that are broken down into three sections: “Practical
Issues in Teaching Writing," “Theoretical Issues in Teaching Writing," and “An Anthology of Essays.” Each section is based on the editors’ firm beliefs that “Writing is teachable; it is an art that can be learned” (Glenn et al., 2003, p. v). Another guiding principle is the contention that “Students learn to write from continual trial-and-error writing” (Glenn, et al., p. v). According to these authors, students “almost never profit from lectures, from teacher-centered classes, or from studying and memorizing isolated rules” (v). With this as a guiding theme, the editors provide instructors with what they describe as ideas and teaching tips based on what they contend “works in the classroom” (v). Perhaps one of the most useful aspects of the book (for new instructors) is the opening chapter in which the editors give ideas on how to prepare to teach a writing course. Among their suggestions is the following advice:

Try at this point to find out all you can about the backgrounds of the students you are likely to encounter. For most of our history, teachers of writing have treated all students as if they were very much alike, but that convenient fiction is no longer feasible to maintain. Our students have different mother tongues, different levels of fluency in edited American English (also called standardized English); they come from different socioeconomic classes and different sectors of society. And now more than ever before, there is a huge range in their ages and life experiences. (p. 5)

Though Glenn et al. (2003) acknowledge that age and life experiences are factors which should be considered when planning a writing course, they do not provide guidance on exactly how writing instruction should/would be influenced by having a significant number of adult students enrolled.

The same is true of VanderMey’s popular basic writing instruction handbook, *The College Writer: A Guide to Thinking, Writing, and Researching* (2009). The editor of the handbook indicates that this book was composed with a diverse student population in mind when he makes a clear distinction between the two types of students who may enroll in a first-year composition course. He explains that, “Whether fresh out of high school or returning as adults, students will take immediately to the book because it addresses their needs and interests. The collegial tone and follow-up activities respect students as thoughtful, self-motivated learners” (v). While VanderMey’s comments suggest that there are different age groups of learners, he assumes that the book is appropriate for both groups because its tone and activities are structured so that students are recognized as self-motivated and thoughtful. There is very little in VanderMey’s textbook or in Glenn et al’s (2003) guide for teachers to indicate that there is anything especially different or unique about how writing instructors should approach the task of teaching writing to adults. If that is the case, then why bother acknowledging that there are differences along lines of age and life experience?

This question challenges instructors who teach adults to examine the theories and principles set forth by scholars who specialize in adult learning. Scholars such as Malcolm Knowles, William A. Draves, Sharan B. Merriam, Rosemary S. Caffarella, and Lisa M. Baumgartner tend to agree that age along with a host of other factors influence
how adults learn. Consequently, adult learning scholars posit that instructors should tailor their instructional practices to the learning needs of adult students. Knowles, for instance, contends that an adult learner is an individual whose “self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self directed human being” (cited in Merriam, Rosemary, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 84). Because of adult learners’ independence and maturity, Merriam et al. (2007) concludes that “part of the job of educators of adults is to help learners, whether they are learning on their own or in formal learning programs, to be able to plan, carry out, and evaluate their own learning” (p. 107).

What is especially useful about self-direction is that there are several different models. In an overview of self-directed learning, Merriam, et al. (2007) explains that the major models of self-direction are Linear Models, Interactive Models, and Instructional models. Merriam, et al. explains the instructional model (the one most relevant to this study) by summarizing Gerald Grow’s Stages of Self-Directed Learning (SSDL). According to this model, students will have various levels of readiness for self-directed learning; therefore, they will likely fall into one of four possible categories ranging from least self-directed or the dependent learner, to the interested learner, to the involved learner, and finally culminating in the self-directed learner (Grow cited in Merriam et al., p. 117). Recognizing these stages should help instructors tailor their teaching methods to meet students where they are while also helping them acquire the skills of a self-directed learner. However, instructors must be aware that there is some debate surrounding self-directed learning. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) for instance suggest that self-directed learning may lead to confusion among students especially in terms of grading. If course work and learning as a whole is indeed self-directed, then can it also be mandatory? Is self-direction undermined when an instructor dictates and evaluates the learning activities? These questions were ones that instructors must consider when weighing the options of using the instructional model to help students become independent (i.e. self-directed) learners.

Our research, which offers suggestions on how to tailor instructional practices to meet the needs of adult learners, is best situated within the context of classic texts which bring together composition studies and adult learning theories. Sommer’s Teaching Writing to Adults: Strategies and Concepts for Improving Writer Performance (1989), Rose’s very popular Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America’s Underprepared (1989), and Brelanger and Strom’s, Second Shift: Teaching Writing to Working Adults (1999) are three works which explicitly engage the topic of teaching writing to adults. Sommer takes an approach that borrows heavily from Knowles’ theory of andragogy and suggests that above all else instructors of adults should make their instruction student-centered rather than instructor-centered. This insight is not unique. For quite some time, the language in the scholarship of teaching and learning has emphasized the ineffectiveness of classes that are strictly lecture-based; student-centered learning spaces are beneficial for children, youth, and especially adults.

In an effort to illustrate the importance of student-centered learning, Rose (1989) and Belanger and Strom (1999) take slightly different approaches. Brelanger and Strom...
offer a historical overview of various industry and/or union-based learning programs that establish collaborations with community colleges and universities to offer continuing education courses to employees. Rose, uses a somewhat autobiographical approach to tell the stories of students who are labeled slow, semi-literate, or in need of remediation. Eventually, many of the students Rose discusses become the men and women that Brelanger and Strom mention in their text; they become the low-wage workers who are underprepared for the demands of the workforce or the college students who are underprepared for academic writing tasks. They are categorized as deficient intellectually and thus in need of remediation or a return to the basics.

Despite the differences in approach, Rose (1989), Sommer (1989), and other scholars tend to agree that when teaching writing to adults, the answer is not to attempt to return to the basics. In an article titled “Writing Wrongs: Observations for Teachers of Adult Learners,” Sapp (2007), uses over thirty years of teaching as a basis for proclaiming that “Adult learners NEVER benefit from a ‘remedial’ approach to learning the ground rules of writing in the English language” (para. 3). Remediation does not work according to Sapp because a teacher of adults is “quite likely to have a mixed bag of writing skills in any classroom for no other reason than a student who passed Freshman English a decade or so before might never have used the skills developed from that experience” (para. 3). For Sapp, the most challenging aspect of teaching writing to adults has less to do actual writing problems and much more to do with thinking and processing.

Invariably, I find that their inability to express themselves effectively with the written word stems from their inability to READ, to THINK (that is process information), and to ANALYZE. These folks are not three bales short of a load mentally—they simply do not understand how to analyze—to reduce macro challenges to individual components, order the components, and contemplate any kind of action as a result; that compounds the problem when you try to help them see mistakes and self-correct. (para. 4)

Sapp’s insights likely ring true for most instructors, and his words further emphasize the important link between writing and thinking. Ebel says that teaching writing is a chronic problem of American education (as cited in White, 1994). He continues on to indicate that it is “right next to teaching them to think, a closely related but even more knotty problem” (p. v).

The chronic nature of the problem of teaching writing and thinking is perhaps exacerbated when considering adults who have family, work, and community commitments to compete with their learning responsibilities. As such, those who would offer effective and efficient instruction to adult learners must take the best that adult education scholars have to offer and combine those insights with the best practices in writing instruction. Glenn et al. (2003) offer an excellent resource for writing instructors (or for those who want to use writing to teach content in other courses). Their book The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing provides chapters on the practical elements of
teaching writing, essays on the theories that undergird the practice of writing instruction, and a collection of essays to reference when making teaching decisions.

In addition to getting insights on how to plan for a course or a series of writing activities, instructors might also consider using the numerous available Internet writing programs to offer students assistance with their writing and understanding of grammar, mechanics, and style; however, Mills (2010) suggests that the most effective approach to help students improve their writing is to combine work on Internet-based writing programs with small group peer revision. McCleod, Brown, McDaniels, and Sledge (2009) agreed that peer writing and revision groups are ideal for traditional undergraduate students. Unfortunately, their research does not take into consideration the extent to which peer review is effective for adult learners, who according to Knowles (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007) tend to be more mature and self-directed. The literature from these scholars provides insights into the challenges and some possible strategies for teaching writing to adults, but before choosing to blindly apply new strategies to unsuspecting students, it was necessary to get a better sense of who our students were and what types of attitudes they had about writing.

Methodology

Participants

The participants for the research project included 56 students who were taking English composition, literature, and management courses during the spring 2010 semester at Jackson State University. A convenience sample was employed to conduct the study. There were 43 females, 11 males, and two individuals who did not indicate gender, who completed the questionnaire. Seventy-two percent of the participants were over 31 years of age. Ninety percent of the participants were juniors or seniors.

Instrument

The researchers developed a questionnaire that contained 22 questions (see Appendix). The instrument contained questions about participant demographics, past writing/literature courses, reading/writing habits, and their perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. Since this was a pilot study, the validity and reliability of the instrument will be taken into consideration in subsequent studies.

Procedures

Permission was received from Jackson State University’s Institutional Research Board (IRB) to conduct the pilot study. The questionnaire was administered during English composition, literature, and management courses offered in a college designed for adult learners. Data were collected from four classes near the end of the semester after students had been in classes and were able to provide feedback on instruction. Students were informed verbally about the purpose of the research project and why they were being asked to complete the questionnaire. The students who agreed to participate
in the research project signed the consent form and were given time during class to complete the questionnaire.

Results

Descriptive data were gathered as a result of the survey. Almost 30 percent of the respondents indicated that they read for pleasure daily. On the other hand, 17 percent stated that they never read for pleasure. Those who responded that they never read for pleasure were asked a follow up question. Fifty-seven percent stated simply that they do not have enough time to read for pleasure. Fourteen percent of the respondents indicated that they do not understand what they have read when they have finished reading. Fifty percent of the respondents identified themselves as either strong or very strong writers. The majority of the participants stated that developing and organizing ideas was the weakest aspect of their writing. Eighteen percent reported that grammar was an issue and 14 percent identified mechanics as an issue. The majority of the respondents stated that in-class writing assignments and instructor feedback from the rough draft were helpful when completing writing assignments (See Figure 1). Sixty-six percent of the respondents indicated that they do not have enough time to devote to studying and completing class assignments (See Figure 2). The results of the research led to the researchers providing some recommendations to help instructors address students’ learning by striking a balance between the best practices in adult learning and composition studies.

Figure 1: Helpful writing activities
Discussion

Given the results of the study, several recommendations for practical strategies for enhancing adult students’ writing proficiency were identified. These recommendations take into consideration the participants’ thoughts on what helps them learn, the principles of composition studies as well as the principles of adult learning, and finally, insights from the investigators’ teaching experiences. The recommendations also discuss efforts to help adult students engage in self-directed learning—a type of learning which grows out of the assumption that as adults age they become (or should be encouraged to become) less dependent and more independent in the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate their own learning according to Knowles (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007). This rather lofty assumption seems simple, but it is in fact rather complex. First of all, as the findings of the research study indicated students overwhelmingly indicate that the reason they do not read and write for pleasure and the reason class activities are not as effective in helping them learn stems from the fact that they do not have time to study (Figure 2). If students perceive that they do not have time to complete assigned/graded class work, then it is unlikely that they will carve out time in their already busy schedules to complete supplemental/ungraded learning activities.

In addition to an absence of student motivation to engage in self-directed learning activities, instructors must consider the ethical implications which emerge when implementing self-directed learning. First the term self-directed might suggest that the work is optional rather than required. Self-direction is often used to describe learning that adults pursue at their own discretion in informal contexts. However, in a formal academic setting, instructors do align goals and objectives with prescribed grading policies, which can be misleading to students and construed as unethical when utilizing self-directed learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Careful planning and discussion of
what self-direction is and how it will be graded can help navigate one ethical concern; however, there is an even more pertinent issue to consider—the contention that some instructors may use self-directed learning techniques as a substitute for providing instruction (Brockett & Hiemstra). Rather than seeing self-directed learning as a way to avoid the work of teaching, it is necessary to understand it as an instructional strategy designed to teach adult students how to be more independent. Achieving the goal of learner independence is much easier said than done, yet it is a goal worth pursuing. What follows are just a few recommendations of practical strategies for enhancing adult students’ writing proficiency and their ability to direct their own learning.

**Recommendation One: Understand the People Involved in the Learning-Teaching Interaction**

The learning process involves both students and instructors, all of whom come to the learning space with their own sets of expectations, fears, anxieties, and objectives. As the instructor, the most significant task is to first understand who the students are as suggested by Glenn et al. (2003) and how adult students learn. Base decisions about which instructional strategies to use on how the students learn. An instructor’s ability to do this demands that he/she take the time to learn who the students are. Effective teaching also demands self-reflection and getting an understanding of the assumptions that the instructor is bringing to the learning experience. What follows are a few tips on how to acquire the information necessary to ensure that the learning and teaching exchange is a positive one for students and teachers.

1. Understand the Learners: Develop a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester in which you collect pertinent data on your students. In the questionnaire, consider asking students what they enjoy reading? What apprehensions they have about the class? What do they consider to be their greatest strengths and weaknesses as learners? Software tools like Survey Monkey and Qualtrics make questionnaires such as this easy to develop and administer. These software tools can also make data analysis simple.

2. Understand Yourself: Develop a course specific assessment plan that will help you evaluate your teaching effectiveness. Enter into the teaching-learning exchange with an understanding that you have strengths and weakness that will influence student learning. A course specific assessment plan that includes an external mid-semester critique from a colleague will help you make adjustments as needed before the end of the semester. During this mid-semester evaluation, your colleague would observe a class session and pose questions to students designed to elicit feedback on their learning and your teaching. After the evaluation, schedule an informal meeting during which you and your colleague discuss his/her observations and the students’ feedback on the course.

**Recommendation Two: Be Realistic when Assigning Reading and Writing Tasks**
The research data indicated that the vast majority of the adult students interviewed did not enjoy reading and do not read on a regular basis because they do not believe that they have time to do so. With this fact in mind, it is unrealistic to assume that students will actually read volumes and volumes of text especially when they are balancing full-time work, full-time student, and sometimes full-time parental responsibilities. Does this mean that the amount of reading and writing required should be reduced for adult learners? Not necessarily. Instead it means that those charged with the task of teaching writing to adults should select assigned readings and writing tasks with surgical-like precision. More required readings and lengthier writing assignments do not necessarily produce more learning. This is especially true if the students do not comprehend or internalize assignments.

1. Select reading materials and activities that are relevant to the students’ lives and experiences. Reading texts that are familiar is a great point of departure in a course that demands discussion and participation. Familiar topics and readings allow opportunities for instructors to model learning strategies such as argument critique or identifying bias on an easily assessable text. As students get comfortable with the process, then more challenging and complex readings may be integrated into the reading list.

2. Make explicit connections between reading assignments and writing tasks. In composition courses, the key to success is to vary the types of assigned readings, while keeping in mind that the focus in a composition class is writing not reading. Therefore, short stories, poems, and plays are ideal options because of their brevity and because they often yield divergent interpretations, which make good fodder for writing prompts. Crossing disciplinary lines when selecting readings is another good idea. A typical composition course will have students who are entering many different disciplines; therefore, it is worth the effort to follow the lead of writing across the curriculum scholars and integrate non-fiction reading assignments into composition courses. This approach gives students an opportunity to see how the writing conventions are indeed discipline specific.

**Recommendation Three: Consider Using Self-Directed Learning Activities’**

Self-directed learning activities should be considered as part of the instructional strategies because not all adult students are naturally independent. In fact those who are attending college for the first time or those who are returning to college after an extended break may often be rather insecure and highly dependent upon the instructor. Self-directed learning may help to build confidence. It may also be an effective instructional approach to use to help students enhance their basic writing proficiency. Interestingly, many of the best practices in composition instruction lend themselves to the instructional model of self-direction, which is recommended for instructors working which students who tend to be very dependent.

1. Prepare the students for self-directed course activities. Define and discuss self-directed learning. Begin the self-direction by designing a course specific assessment that may be used to determine where the students are at the beginning
of the semester. In writing courses a common assignment is a diagnostic essay. Respond to the assignment as if it were a graded assignment, but rather than marking each error in the fashion of a line editor provide each student with evaluative comments at the end of the composition. In those evaluative comments list the most common errors, provide a list of resources available to help the students learn more about how to identify and correct the error. Some options might be free tutoring in the campus writing center, online tutorials which provide instant feedback, or even exercises in the text. As more textbook publishers have developed free online supplements it has become easier to direct students to extra exercises; however, more research will be necessary to determine the effectiveness of online writing tutorial programs (Mills, 2010).

According to Mills’ findings, extensive research has shown that the traditional method of marking technical errors in student writing is more discouraging than it is helpful; therefore, writing instructors are beginning to turn to computer assisted programs to help students identify punctuation and grammar errors. Mills states that research has not yet proven that Internet-based writing programs result in higher test scores. What she found in her study was that students who engaged in computer-based programs as well as small-group revisions of their rough drafts did have improved scores on the English Competency Test. Although a direct connection could not be drawn between the improved test scores and the Internet based writing programs, the students did believe that the writing program was helpful (Mills, 2010). Her findings are encouraging because they reinforce our belief that encouraging self-directed learning is an essential part of improving adult learners’ writing proficiency.

2. Follow-up the first step by requiring students to develop and submit a personal improvement plan which includes their learning objectives, the resources they plan to use to address those learning needs, as well as their strategies for assessing their progress. Depending upon the overall course goals and objectives, these self-directed activities may or may not need to be graded. If they are graded, the policy should be explained to students in step one. If the activities are not graded, then some efforts should be made to ensure that students give adequate attention to the activities. Instructors may consider offering extra points. An incentive such as this may be necessary because as the research findings indicate, students, especially those in writing courses, tend to depend quite heavily on their instructors to help them revise their compositions. They are less likely to see the value in peer review or in self-evaluation of their writing. It is understandable then that by extension they might not see the value of putting forth the effort to learn independently. Despite this reality, one part of the instructors’ goal should be to prepare and motivate students to become increasingly self-directed. By taking the time to structure assignments and discussions of self-direction at the beginning of the semester, it becomes possible for adult educators to emphasize the importance of students acquiring the skills needed to manage their own learning. Typically this is most effectively done by emphasizing that self-directed learning is a skill which can be applied
immediately to work-related activities as well as school and personal learning needs.

2. **Recommendation Four: Prepare Students to Succeed**

Sequence writing assignments to ensure that students have the knowledge needed to successfully complete the assigned task (Glenn et al., 2003). Begin this process by compiling a list of all of the things that the students would need to know to successfully complete the assignment. Plan the learning-teaching interactions so that each aspect of the assignment is adequately covered. Integrate non-graded activities to tests students’ mastery of the various components before the graded assignment is submitted.

1. One excellent action step to follow here is to set aside class time for students to work independently or collectively to begin assignments. For instance, in management or leadership courses, the instructor may find one current event that can be given to every student and have students practice writing during the class. It is important that students understand what a current event is and how to search for current events. Giving students an example of what a current event looks like helps them easily find current events related to specific subject matter. Next, instruct students to write a brief synopsis of the article and provide detailed examples of how the current event relates to topics that have been discussed during class. Assigning current events gives students an opportunity to read different articles and develop critical thinking skills. Giving students time to begin assignments in class allows them an opportunity to practice and ask relevant questions about the writing assignment. This very simple step can also build confidence and reassure students that they do in fact know what they need to know to complete the assignment.

Allowing class time such as this is a time saving step for all involved. Students get to practice in class which saves them time attempting to figure out what to do on their own, and instructors get an opportunity to identify most major errors early on and thereby saving valuable time in the grading process. Perhaps most significantly, this recommendation aligns with one assumption made by Knowles that expanded the term of andragogy. The underpinnings of this assumption state that, “Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know or to cope effectively with their real-life situations” (as cited in Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p.137). In-class time to start assignments means that students get clarity on what they need to know to complete the task; therefore, when they depart, it is more likely that they will strive to study, practice, and/or learn the skills, information, etc. that will help them complete the assignment.

2. Another action step is to determine the extent to which peer-to-peer learning will be utilized in the course. The participants in the study were not convinced that peer review was beneficial in helping them learn. This
perception likely accounts for the students’ resistance to actively engaging in in-class peer review activities. Students are not alone in their skepticism. Instructors also have doubts and disagreements regarding the effectiveness of peer review; however, the views set forth by McLeod et al. (2009) are encouraging to those interested in using peer review as one part of a comprehensive instructor modeled self-directed learning plan. Their research team includes writing instructors, a writing center director, as well as writing lab tutors who contend that peer assisted learning can become a useful resource in composition courses, when mode specific rubrics are used to guide students in their assessments of their peers’ writing (McLeod et al.). This means that assignments must be carefully constructed and accompanied by a rubric that students receive at the beginning of the writing process. To make the most of peer review, consider beginning with a whole-class (instructor-led) review of a sample paper from a previous class. Model how to use a rubric to offer a good critique of a text. Follow-up by showing students how the draft was revised based on the peer review. The authors suggest that the key is to implement peer review with care being meticulous in training students to peer review and equally careful in the development of assignment specific rubrics.

Conclusion

Implementation of these recommendations should be done with attention to the specific adult learners. The recommendations should also be considered in light of particular instructors’ teaching styles and course learning outcomes. As the first recommendation suggests, this pilot study grew out of a desire to more fully understand our students and thereby tailor our teaching methods to improve their learning, specifically their writing proficiency. Reflecting on the findings of the study and the new issues that were revealed during the research process, we realized that there are some important next steps in expanding and improving the study.

1. We will revise the questionnaire based on what was learned during the pilot study. The respondents in this study were allowed to give perceptions of themselves. This only allowed the researchers to make broad recommendations. In order to deal with the data more intimately, it will be necessary for the researchers to identify the students in the study so that students’ self perceptions of themselves as writers may be compared with their actual performance--writing proficiency.

2. We will also need to expand the total number of participants involved in the study. During the pilot study, the researchers had access to a relatively small sample size during one semester. It is necessary to include more participants to gain a better understanding of reading and writing habits of students. Expanding the sample size will likely demand that additional measures be taken to identify students by their academic major.
3. Finally, we will need to develop a systematic perhaps comparative approach for assessing which instructional practices actually produce improved student performance. Thus far, the recommendations are based on the current literature in the field, the instructors’ teaching experiences, and the students’ perceptions of what helps them learn. In subsequent studies, we will need to collect data that explicitly connects instructional methods to student performance on in class assignments and university writing assessments.

Although the work of teaching writing is challenging, or to borrow Ebel’s words “a chronic problem” (as cited in White, 1994, xi) in education, we owe it to our students to find effective strategies for ensuring students’ continuous improvement.

References

Appendix

Please complete the following questionnaire regarding your reading and writing habits.

Demographics

Please indicate your gender.  ____ Male  ____ Female

Please indicate your age.  ____ under 30  ____ 31-35  ____ 36-40  ____ 41-45  ____ 46-50  ____ 51-55  ____ 56-60  ____ over 60

Please indicate your classification.  ____ Freshman  ____ Sophomore  ____ Junior  ____ Senior

Past Experience in English Composition/Literature Courses

Including this course, how many English composition (writing) courses have you taken?

___ none ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 or more

Including this course, how many literature courses have you taken?

___ none ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 or more

Reading Habits

How often do you read for pleasure?

___ never  ___ once/month  ___ once/week  ___ twice/week  ___ once/day

If you answered never, what hinders you from pleasure reading?

_____ I do not enjoy reading  _____ Not enough time to read  _____ I do not understand what I have read after I have finished reading.

What best describes the type of material you read most often?

_____ Books  _____ Newspapers  _____ Scholarly journals  _____ Information Magazines (Time)  _____ Pleasure or Popular Magazines (Jet, Ebony)  _____ Textbooks (Required Assignments for Class)

What genres of literature do you most often read?

_____ Fiction (novels, short stories)  _____ Non-fiction (biographies, autobiographies, self-help)  _____ Poetry  _____ Sacred Text (Bible, Koran, etc.)

Please indicate one of your favorite books.

________________________________________________________________________

Please indicate one of your children’s favorite books to read.

________________________________________________________________________

Writing Habits

How would you rank (describe) yourself as a writer?

_____ Very Strong  _____ Strong  _____ Weak  _____ Very Weak

What do you consider the weakest aspect of your writing?

_____ Clarity  _____ Developing ideas  _____ Organizing ideas  _____ Grammar  _____ Mechanics (spelling, punctuation)

Do you keep a personal journal?  ____ Yes  ____ No

Do you write letters/email/blogs to family, friends, and/or colleagues?  ____ Yes  ____ No
If you answered yes, how often do you write letters/email/blog to family, friends, and/or colleagues?
   _____Daily   _____ 1-2 times per week   _____3-5 times per week

What type of writing do you most often like to do?
   _____ None   _____Poetry   _____ Short Fiction   _____ Non-fiction   _____ Work related   _____ School related(required)

What type or types of activities are most effective at helping you complete your class writing assignments successfully?
   _____ Pre-writing assignments which help me generate ideas
   _____ In-class writing time which allows me to receive immediate feedback from my instructor
   _____ Reviewing papers written by previous students who completed the assignment successfully
   _____ Receiving a detailed checklist of guidelines for what a successful assignment must include
   _____ Receiving feedback on my rough draft from my classmates during peer review
   _____ Receiving feedback on my rough draft from my instructor

What specific reading assignments have you enjoyed the most?
   _____ Short stories that deal with race and racism
   _____ Plays (dramas) that explore family and community relationships
   _____ Non-fiction articles and essays that discuss American cultural myths
   _____ Poetry that conveys anti-slavery themes in American Literature
   _____ Autobiographies (slave narratives) that reveal the histories of African Americans
   _____ Novels that explore gender and race

If class activities are not helping you learn, what do you feel is the reason that you are not learning how to improve your writing and reading skills?
   _____ Lack of motivation
   _____ Not enough time to devote to studying and completing class assignments
   _____ Do not understand the assignment
   _____ Do not understand the relevance of required assignments
   _____ Ineffective instruction

Do you feel that your reading comprehension and writing skills have improved as the semester has progressed?
   _____ Yes
   _____ No

Do you have plans as to how you will continue to develop your reading and writing skills once the semester is completed?
   _____ I will take another literature or writing class.
   _____ I will read more during my leisure time.
   _____ I will start to keep journals to improve my writing skills.
   _____ I will start a book club.
   _____ I do not have a plan to continue to develop my reading and writing skills.