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ABSTRACT

While placement procedures and lack of writing skills are certainly perplexing, classroom practices and procedures remain the most fundamental of challenges for the developmental writing instructor for good reason: time-on-task methods are the most direct means by which students improve skill levels. One instructor found that this approach to teaching writing had become inappropriate for students. Therefore the course was redesigned by employing more explicit teaching methods. It was feared that students in previous summer programs at the University of Dayton (Ohio) had lost sight of fundamental principles of writing because the instructor had de-emphasized the product of their writing and over-emphasized the process. For these students, constant feedback and reassurance that they were accomplishing goals was sometimes more important than the monitoring of writing stages. The fundamental design of the course became to augment writing strategies with goal-directed procedures. For example, when the exemplification essay was taught, the instructor emphasized throughout the unit what the students should accomplish and the strategies that typically support the goal. Less reliance was placed on their grasping the actual skills than on their clearly focusing on goals of that exemplification assignment. Central to this emphasis on teaching the formal features of a writing assignment is the sense that developmental students need to enter a comfort zone in which strategies, goals, and expectations are clearly expressed. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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Explicit Teaching and the Developmental Writing Course

The developmental writing program at many universities suffers from an identity crisis. Instructors find themselves adrift in a sea of pedagogical possibilities, only to discover that neither traditional approaches nor current innovations find adequate expression in the basic writing classroom. Student difficulties with writing are frequently misunderstood or are so overwhelmingly challenging that instructors decry the very existence of the program as unworthy of college-level curriculum. Students themselves, often highly motivated but poorly skilled, become lost in the arcane vocabulary of the college composition classroom. For these students, the formulation of a thesis statement becomes an exercise in frustration and futility.

Likewise, identifying the developmental writer becomes just as problematic as selecting appropriate methods of instruction. Typically, admissions officials and department chairs must decipher volumes of test scores or Individualized Education Plans in order to determine placement status. The process may be further complicated when a student is learning disabled. In such cases, special tutors are often called in to support the classroom instructor.

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Both the status of the developmental writer and the expectations of his or her writing instructor are determined by factors which are misunderstood or poorly conceived simply because adequate information about the developmental writer is not available. This situation is all too familiar for those who work with these at-risk students. It only serves to point up the need for an on-going re-evaluation of placement procedures, assessment, and teaching methods.

While placement procedures and lack of writing skills are certainly perplexing, classroom practices and procedures remain the most fundamental of challenges for the developmental writing instructor for good reason: time-on-task methods are the most direct means by which students improve skill levels. The interaction between teacher and pupil in the classroom setting is the most significant variable in the learning process. Consequently, it would appear that most effort should be concentrated on classroom methods. This concern is not meant to indict those instructors who labor faithfully with developmental students. Rather, it is meant to encourage a re-examination of practices that may well be appropriate for the majority of student writers, but not for those who require different kinds of learning materials and methods.

As a teacher of developmental students, I am faced with this dilemma yearly. At the University of Dayton, we accept seventy such students in the Summer Trial Enrollment Program (STEP). To be fully accepted in the fall, these students are required to

pass English 101 and another course--typically, Western Civilization, Communications, or Sociology--with grades of C during a six-week summer session. The English 101 course covers expository writing, focusing on the different modes--process, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, summary, classification, and exemplification. Since 1988--my first year as an instructor in STEP--I have employed the basic process method--multiple drafts, peer revision, and conferencing--emphasizing the apparatus of each mode. Too often I found students frustrated with this approach: they would confuse the nature and purpose of the assignment with the language and framework of the apparatus. Likewise, I held firm to the belief that the introduction of models would only impose another structure on the students to imitate, discouraging the individual's voice. I argued that the writer-based assignments were best generated when students were unburdened with professional models to emulate.

While the majority of these students passed English 101, I came to realize that my approach to the course had become inappropriate for these students. Teaching a course in six weeks which is offered normally during a sixteen-week semester to at-risk students who are entering a college atmosphere for the first time is a daunting challenge for any instructor. The time constraint and labor-intensive requirements--six essays, a journal, and an exit exam--had become somewhat counter-productive as I identified reoccurring mistakes. For example, when I teach

these same students English 102--a course in argumentation--in the fall, I find myself reviewing fundamentals that should have been learned during the previous summer.

As I prepared for last summer's STEP students, I decided to redesign the course by employing more explicit teaching methods. I feared that students in previous summer programs had lost sight of fundamental principles of writing because I de-emphasized the product of their writing and over-emphasized the process. For these students, constant feedback and re-assurance that they were accomplishing goals were sometimes more important than the monitoring of writing stages. To augment writing strategies with goal-directed procedures was my fundamental design. For example, when I taught the exemplification essay, I emphasized throughout the unit what the students should accomplish and the strategies that typically support that goal. I relied less on their grasping the actual skills than on their clearly focusing on goals of that exemplification assignment. Consequently, students began to adapt their process to the explicit product expected at the conclusion of the unit--in most cases a 750-word essay. When I introduced a model of exemplification as the students began to adapt their own writing to the goal, they began to see the possible consequences of their writing decisions. These students began to rely upon some kind of model in each unit; their investigation of models provided a sense of security that the pure process pedagogy denied them.

In light of recent assessment-based pedagogy developed at

many universities and the necessity for accountability structures for teachers at all levels of instruction, explicit teaching methods, such as those I employed with STEP students at the University of Dayton, need further consideration, especially for the developmental writer. The explicit specifications of the formal features and rules of a writing assignment provide the developmental writing classroom with a secure base on which developmental students can succeed. Explicit teaching can be useful for those students who operate well within clearly defined learning situations, such as those for developmental students.

Central to this emphasis on teaching the formal features of a writing assignment is the sense that developmental students need to enter a comfort zone in which strategies, goals, and expectations are clearly expressed. Drawing on recent studies of explicit teaching, a redefinition of formal features of a text and explicit teaching methods can offer instructors of developmental students an alternative pedagogy. In her discussion of the possibility of explicit teaching, Aviva Freedman suggests that there are "certain limited conditions under which explicit teaching may enhance learning--at least for certain learners" (241). Although Freedman remains skeptical of its uses, she does cite Ellis's model of "Instructed Acquisition" to prove that under certain conditions the acquisition and application of cognitive strategies can allow the learner to use his or her linguistic knowledge with fluency and skill (241). According to Freedman, Ellis points to two circumstances in which

explicit teaching can lead to implicit knowledge:

> In the first instance, Ellis argues that some structures can be explicitly taught and acquired if the following conditions are met: (1) The student is at the appropriate stage of development and has an appropriate learning style; (2) the student is engaged in an authentic task that calls on the use of this structure. In other words, when interacting with students over work-in-progress either individually or in mini-lessons, certain kinds of explicit instruction may be useful to students who are ready and who have the appropriate learning style. (243)

These conditions offer alternative possibilities in the developmental writing classroom as they provide an atmosphere in which immediate intervention can take place. Explicit teaching exposes students to models as they practice strategies within relevant contexts. Consequently, time-on-task strategies can be used which situate skills and knowledge within authentic contexts. The Ellis model suggests further that very little if any ambiguity should enter into the teaching situation. Readiness and learning style are clearly identified in most developmental writing programs. The challenge, as mentioned above, remains in the selection of appropriate methodology.

Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb take Ellis's position further by arguing a case for explicit teaching. He and his

colleagues at The University of Chicago have "explicitly taught fine-grained features of academic and professional writing to juniors, seniors, graduate students, professional students, and post-doctoral fellows" in their advanced writing program (257). While hardly the developmental writing level of instruction, Williams' program taught common features of any writing program:

> The principles they explicitly learn include, at the sentence level, the correlation of crucial actions with verbs and characters with subjects, the flow of old and new information, the location of rhetorically significant words in the stress of sentences; at the discourse level, consistent and inconsistent topic strings, choosing particular sequences of sentence topics to achieve particular points of view, the cognitive structure of problems and their rhetorical formulation, the exact placement of major claims, patterns of lexical chaining and repetition. (257-258)

Accordingly, Williams and his colleagues have found explicit teaching of these "fine-grained features" to be useful and profitable. Students have indicated upon completion of this advanced writing program that they value this explicit teaching model enough to ask for more instruction (Williams 259).

Addressing the nature and purpose of rhetorical craft, Jeanne Fahnestock offers yet another defense for explicit teaching. In her article "Genre and Rhetorical Craft," she

distinguishes between a "craft" and a "body of knowledge," analyzing the unique features of both of these constructs. She takes exception to those theorists who argue that a craft is never taught with a conscious awareness of technique (269). However, a "body of knowledge," unlike a craft, can be taught by implicit means. Citing rhetorical manuals of the first century B.C.E., Fahnestock attests to the validity of explicit forms of instruction. For example, classical manuals, such as Rhetorica ad Herennium, specify "parts of full orations defined by [their] large-scale features of arrangements: introduction, statement of facts, divisions, proof, reputations, and conclusion" (I, iii, 4). Consequently, these classical heuristics helped rhetors seek to justify courses of action. As Fahnestock points out, "When life presented them with real situations, they were prepared" (269).

This classical way of explicit teaching has further implications for instruction today. Fahnestock cites that student difficulties with argumentation can be alleviated with explicit techniques of instruction:

> Many of the strategies taught are revivals of features in the classical rhetorical curriculum: the enthymeme, the epicheireme revived in the Toulmin model, the stages, and the common topics. (270)

These formal structures are common features of writing classes, both basic and advanced. Additionally, the setting in which

these structures succeed is marked by the analysis of models and the close monitoring of students. Fahnestock asserts further that "students are not going to recognize regularities in texts ... if they do not expect regularities or do not know what counts as a significant regularity worthy of imitation" (270). This position holds true for adult writers as well as for student writers. It is unlikely that basic or developmental students can produce specific writing assignments if they have had no practice with the constituent elements of those writing tasks.

In their study investigating the effects of writing models on students' writing, Davida Charney and Richard Carlson provide further evidence of the effects of explicit teaching. They discovered that how students reason about and apply the models is more important than the quality of the models themselves (114). They speculated that the active analysis of models may help students in two ways:

> First, active analysis of a model may help students construct new textual patterns or enrich the patterns they know. Writers who actively look for and contemplate the fine-grained features in the models are more likely to construct reliable new structures. Second, consulting models actively during the writing process may provide the writer with a data base for testing whether an idea should be included. (114)

While their findings were based on studies of psychology students learning research methods, they concluded that this type of

explicit use of models can help shape any writer's composing process. This pedogogical strategy nonetheless warrants close examination of how students read models and how they use them during writing. Furthermore, the use of models as a form of explicit teaching can affect the ways developmental writers compose. Learning to write in a genre can be an explicit way by which developmental students can progress in a discipline. By writing in a genre, the developmental writer can practice the conventions of content, structure, and style, adapting the underlying assumptions of these constraints to fit the peculiarities of the assignment.

This promising line of research helps writing teachers match strategies to students' knowledge and maturity. By distinguishing between explicit strategies that aid acquisition and those that enhance control of features already acquired, explicit teaching in the developmental writing classroom can have far-reaching implications. It recommends that the basic writing instructor focus explicitly on the central, constitutive features of the assignment that students are learning. Because the developmental writer follows instructions rigidly and concretely, this type of controlled learning environment may prove beneficial.

Ellis, Williams, Colomb, Fahnestock, Charney and Carlson base their findings on certain assumptions which can be helpful for the developmental writing instructor who wants to employ explicit teaching models:

> [An instructor's] decisions about what and how [he or she] teaches should be informed by knowledge of how students learn, of what there is to learn, and of the effectiveness of specific techniques in specific situations, both short- and long-term. The more [the instructor] knows, the better [he or she] can decide what to make explicit, and what not. (Williams 260)

For the developmental writer or at-risk student, this learning climate provides clearly defined expectations and strategies which allow them to participate and to succeed in the composition classroom. For the developmental writing instructor, the need to clarify expectations and to demonstrate strategies and appropriate practice emerges as a paramount objective.

Although explicit teaching claims seem hardly new or even innovative, they do remind classroom instructors, especially those of developmental writers, that closely monitored, fine-grained pedagogical methods are valuable features of the writing course. Furthermore, instructors of developmental writers or at-risk students are encouraged to design their courses around explicit practices and to emphasize detail, form, and usage. Although these bracing pedagogical concerns need further study, reflection, and testing, explicit teaching in controlled circumstances can remain a viable alternative at any level of instruction.

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