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ABSTRACT

Shared writing is a technique for working with adult literacy learners that involves all members of the group, including the tutor, in regularly writing together, reading, and hearing each other's work, and occasionally preparing materials for publication to the outside community. In preparation for developing a professional development program for literacy practitioners based on shared writing, two researchers examined the state of the art of teaching of writing in adult literacy programs in western Canada. A total of 60 instructors, tutors, and coordinators from 50 adult and volunteer literacy programs that had been selected as reflecting the best practices in teaching writing at the adult level in western Canada participated in 20-minute telephone interviews. Some of the individuals participated in a Delphi computer conference to explore selected issues raised during the telephone interviews more thoroughly. With the exception of the amount of time to prepare and teach writing, practitioners were generally positive about the writing portion of their program. Most programs were based on one-to-one tutoring. Few professional development opportunities for literacy practitioners were available. Teachers recognized that writing can be a life skill. Similar interviews with adult literacy learners was planned. (Contains 22 references.) (MN)

SEEKING THE "PHENOMENOLOGICAL NOD": REPORT OF AN INQUIRY INTO CURRENT WRITING PRACTICES IN ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS IN WESTERN CANADA*

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1

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Abstract

Experience in adult literacy with the use of "shared writing" as a means of self-discovery, greater self-awareness and increased self-confidence led us to propose a professional development (PD) project on the process. Before attempting to pass this approach to writing on to other writing tutors, however, we faced the need for a better understanding of our proposed clients' needs and present practices. This paper describes how adult writing tutors were collaboratively consulted, what their practices, interests and reservations about writing were, and how they responded to the idea of shared writing as a possible "lifeskill" tool and experience in their programs.

SEEKING THE "PHENOMENOLOGICAL NOD": AN INQUIRY INTO CURRENT WRITING PRACTICES IN ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS IN WESTERN CANADA

Background

We are involved in planning and providing training and professional development (PD) activities for adult educators, including volunteer literacy tutors. Lately, our interest has become focused on the issue of the teaching and use of writing in adult literacy (AL) programs.

Specifically, in working directly with AL students who were using *shared writing* as a means of group-building, self-expression and reflection, we (and the participants themselves) have observed impressive growth in the personal maturity and self-esteem of the participants. (*Shared writing* involves all members of the group, including the tutor, regularly writing together, reading and hearing each other's work in the group, and occasionally preparing materials for publication to the outside community.) We wondered whether our results could be replicated, whether they would be of similar interest to other practitioners, and whether others would share our view that writing as a "lifeskill" (i.e., to help students achieve personal growth as well as academic skill and employability) would be a worthwhile element of the AL curriculum.

Before making plans to develop professional development (PD) programming for literacy and AL practitioners, we decided we needed to do some needs analysis, to learn more about the state of the present art in the teaching of writing in AL programs in

Western Canada. We felt we needed to know more about what AL writing tutors did, why they did it, and how they felt about the results. (The term "tutor" included instructors and volunteers.)

In particular, we wondered:

- Did AL practitioners feel they were successful in their teaching of writing?
- Did they feel adequately prepared to teach writing to adults?
- If tutors (by which we meant instructors and tutors, whether paid or volunteer) did not feel comfortable teaching writing, to what did they attribute their unease, and what might ameliorate it?
- What attitudes and values did tutors perceive in their students toward writing?
- What did the practitioners feel writing *was*? (A literacy skill? A means of self-expression? A pain?)
- Overall, how satisfied were those involved with the writing component of their AL program?

There were several another reasons why we felt we could not presume to develop and offer training for practitioners without answers to at least some of these questions.

We were aware of the wide variety of goals being promoted for writing programs in the practitioner-oriented press (ERIC was particularly useful here), including "holistic learning," "collaborative learning," "whole language experiences," "component skills instruction," "discourse mode analysis," "shared writing," "negotiated meaning," "integrated instruction," and others (Reuys, 1992; Butler and Bentley, 1992; Daise, 1994; Foote, 1997; Blair, 1997; Shanahan, 1997). We also knew many programs focused on workplace literacy, with quite different implications for curriculum and teaching (Perin,

1994; *Visions for Greater Employment Opportunities*, 1995; *Workplace Literacy Curriculum*, 1994; *Reading/Writing Survival Skills for Hospital Staff*, 1992).

While this diversity of interest and objectives seemed to be motivated by a sincere grassroots quest for greater meaning in the AL language arts program, it also seemed to be poorly researched. There was a prevailing assumption (recently discussed in these pages) that many present practices in literacy were narrow, restrictive and obsolescent (Malicky and Norton, 1998, p. 119). What was lacking, however, was a sense of what practitioners beyond a single program were actually *doing*, and how they themselves regarded their present work, in the teaching of writing to adults in literacy programs. There appeared to us to be somewhat too many unsupported assumptions for the available data.

At the same time, we felt there *could be* legitimacy in the criticisms of present practice, and that the suggestions arising from the assumptions, albeit poorly supported, were valuable. We felt this way because of our recent experiences with writing practices in AL programs, and with AL students in our own program. Much of what we were reading was arguing that the teaching of writing should emphasize "lifewriting" about real issues and problems (Butler and Bentley, 1992); should address the writers' needs for enhanced self-esteem and confidence (Bardine, 1995; O'Rourke and Mace, 1992); should encourage reflection and personal growth (Kerka, 1996); and should empower, promote reflection, and lead student writers to more perspective on and insight into the social and cultural elements of their lives (Kamler, 1995; Williamson, 1997; McClay, 1998). We agreed, despite the lack of evidence, because *these were the same outcomes our experience in our own program had convinced us were really achievable.* We wanted to

confirm the impression that this was so, and that others - especially practitioners - agreed with our view that writing could be a "lifeskill" in the literacy curriculum.

Another motivator was the potentially exciting phenomenon of "teacher as provider of text" (McClay, 1998), the dual role of the teacher as instructor *and* (for those courageous enough) participant and sharer in the writing process. In the best examples of this phenomenon, "In using their own writing, teachers make resources for present and future use with students [and] the acts and artifacts of writing contribute to their abilities to engage students in genuine writing" (McClay, 1998, p. 179). While we were reasonably convinced from our own experience that the techniques of shared writing and "teacher as text" were effective in just this way, we wondered how widespread this appreciation of writing was in AL, where and with whom our PD activities were to be conducted.

A final incentive for a careful study of practice grew out of our awareness of the potentially bewildering array of professional development (PD) packages for writing tutors (including potentially our own!), based on various assumptions about AL tutors' and instructors' needs and preferences for training (*Writing Instruction for READers' Writings*, 1995; *Catching Ourselves in the Act*, 1996; Preston and Wilson, 1993; *Volunteer Literacy Tutor Training Model for Teaching Adults*, 1995). We did not want to simply add more to this already impressive outpouring. We felt that a sensitively conducted inquiry into the beliefs and practices of AL writing practitioners might allow us to offer better guidance, more original ideas, and more useful inservice training about writing and the teaching of writing to our potential clients in the region's AL and literacy communities.

Assumptions and impressions

In planning to study the views and practices of AL writing tutors we made some assumptions. These were based on our recent experiences providing inservice writing resource materials and training activities for literacy program tutors. The key assumptions, which we articulated as part of our method (see below) and which we planned to test in the study, were:

1. Most tutors do not write in their own lives except for utilitarian purposes (letters, lists, forms); "lifewriting" (Butler and Bentley, 1992), or writing to discover meaning or to aid reflection, is rare.
2. Most tutors, regardless of their experience or training, do not feel particularly comfortable teaching writing in general, and even less so teaching -- or even working with -- writing which results in self-disclosure.
3. Partially as a result of #2, most literacy tutors prefer to see writing as a skill or a set of skills; they do not comfortably view writing as a potential means to increased self-awareness.
4. Most students' views come to resemble those of their tutors.

We arrived at the last point, above, from the observation that most writing teachers are *product*- as opposed to *process*-oriented (McClay, 1998). That is, they are more concerned about students' writing *output* than their writing *experiences*. In contrast, the shared writing which had had such impact in our own program focused on and was closely connected to the writing *process* itself, arising out of, depending upon, and reflecting the trust and support in the group environment.

Why would product be more attractive than process to tutors? We theorized that if writing was not comfortable for the tutors themselves their teaching would gravitate toward the objective, controllable and predictable, and away from the more risky personal and spontaneous. Again, we sought confirmation of these speculations.

Design of the study

Focus and sample

The study was intended to explore the *real* state of writing instruction in volunteer tutor and AL programs in Western Canada, using a small number of selected programs (up to 50), and methods which we felt would both reveal and confirm actual practices and the underlying reasons for them. We wanted the study to surface what literacy practitioners actually *did* in teaching writing, rather than what their intentions might be. While we wanted to draw out from practitioners the truth about their work, we also recognized and wanted to respect their understandable desire to protect their students, their programs and themselves from admissions that would suggest their programs might have weaknesses, or might not be "with it" in some important way.

We selected our participant programs intentionally, choosing those which we knew, from direct contact or the recommendations of others, cared about and focused on writing in their programs. We felt our results would, as a result, reflect the *best* practices in the teaching of writing at the AL level in Western Canada.

The research methodology

Our selection of an intentional sample was consistent with the general method we adopted in the study. As we looked for a method and processes which would serve all our purposes while respecting those of our "sample," we came under the influence of the phenomenological outlook on research (van Manen, 1997). Specifically, we found ourselves *nodding* as we read statements such as these:

> Most people find writing difficult. They will talk with much more ease and eloquence and with much less reserve than they will write their thoughts on paper.... Writing forces the person into a reflective attitude—in contrast to face-to-face conversation in which people are much more immediately involved. This reflective attitude together with the linguistic demands of the writing process place certain constraints on the free obtaining of lived-experience descriptions (p. 64).
>
> If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already know, we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character (p. 47).
>
> The problem ... is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much. Or, more accurately, the problem is that our 'common sense' pre-understandings, our suppositions,

> assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question (p. 46).

Part of the impact of van Manen's words was to persuade us that we would learn more about the teaching of AL writing if we incorporated some phenomenological principles in our method of inquiry. We decided to attempt to focus our study on the *lived experience of adults teaching writing to other adults*, with the intention of helping the study's tutor participants to *both report and reflect on* what they were doing in the role of teacher of writing.

What we would be looking for in our study was the same sort of *phenomenological nod* from participants in and readers of our results as we had found ourselves giving to van Manen's comments. In other words, if we were successful in our task readers of our work (including you) should find themselves nodding at the plausibility of our account -- recognizing it as something they either had experienced or thought, or plausibly *could have*.

Procedures

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and Alberta's then Department of Advanced Education and Career Development (AECD) funded the *Write to Learn* project, as they had its immediate predecessor, *Chapters*. *Chapters* was the project in which we had observed AL writers using their writing, and the shared writing process, as a lifeskill. *Chapters* had taught us that a group of adults functioning academically at the AL level could use writing as a means of achieving catharsis, acceptance, and self-

confidence, as demonstrated by the cohesion of the group during the project, and the willingness of its participants to speak and subsequently to act with increasing independence in their lives.

Write to Learn drew on some of the lessons and products from *Chapters*. Specifically the highly successful *Chapters* manual *Writing Out Loud* was used for some of the actual writing exercises and activities. More importantly, the underlying philosophy developed in *Chapters* was adopted in the *Write to Learn* project: that writing could be therapeutic and liberating if done in an accepting and supportive atmosphere. *Write to Learn* operated in 1997-1998 in the rural Alberta community of Camrose, an hour outside of Edmonton. Using writing and the sharing of writing within a small group of literacy students as a way of helping them to reflect on and come to better terms with their lives and their futures, *Write to Learn* refined the *Chapters* model to the point where we felt it could be shared with others in the form of PD.

To test the assumptions we were making about the needs and preferences of literacy practitioners, and to incorporate the findings of the research quickly into the planning for of PD, we planned this research to proceed concurrently with development of the *Write to Learn* PD materials.

To provide the opportunity for participants in the research study to provide as complete a picture as possible of their activities we decided to use a two-part process. The first part would be a twenty-minute **telephone interview**, which would produce a general description of the writing-related activities of each program, ratings of some elements of the program which we were interested in, and free-responses by the

participants to some open-ended questions. The interviewer would record all answers in writing, interacting and clarifying as needed.

From the results of the telephone interviews basic information was gained about the teaching and uses of writing in each participating program. As well, the interviewers identified participants who seemed to have particular interest in the study and its objectives. Some of these individuals were approached to participate in the second part of the study, a **Delphi-style computer conference** which explored more deeply findings and problematic results from the telephone interviews. A single individual (DM) from the research group moderated the Delphi activity and summarized the findings.

Findings of the study

The telephone interviews

To address our questions, in April 1998 we contacted fifty AL and volunteer literacy programs in Western Canada by telephone to discuss their work with and interest in the teaching and uses of writing in their own program. (We were aware of these programs from the *Chapters* project, and from our other connections with the literacy community.) Participants identified themselves by their role, as instructors, tutors or coordinators (and sometimes as more than one: a common fact of literacy programs is the wearing of many hats by few workers).

The type of program (rural or urban), size of enrolment, and self-described role or job title(s) of the participants, by home province or territory, are shown in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The participants and their programs. We asked the participants where they worked, and what their role was in the program. As shown in Table 1:

- The largest group of participants was from Alberta (about one-third of the total.)
- There were equal numbers of rural and urban programs.
- Participants indicated the following job titles: coordinator (57%), instructor (35%), and tutor (8%). (Most performed more than one role.)

The literacy programs themselves had the following characteristics.

- Some of the programs described themselves as both fulltime and part-time, but part-time programs outnumbered fulltime almost 3 to 1.
- One-to-one tutoring was the most common instructional format (50%), but group and classroom (32%) and small group instruction (18%) were also represented in reported methods.
- There was a considerable range in the age of individual programs, from 10 years (Alberta) to 2 years (NWT).
- Programs were of varying sizes, from an average of over 80 students in Saskatchewan to 10 in the NWT.
- Most programs (27) reported they had not changed size since the previous year, but 12 reported growth, and 4 reported some reduction.

Program activities. A key question in our initial survey was, *What kind of writing is being done (or is being neglected)?* (We hoped that in the later Delphi

exchange the further question, *Why?*, might be answered.)

Table 2, below, contains the findings. These were the kinds of writing rated **most or least common** in these literacy programs:

[Insert Table 2 here]

The key points expressed in Table 2 were:

- Seventy-eight percent of writing in literacy-level writing programs consisted of three types: spelling and grammar drills/skills (35%), personal stories and letters (28%), and journals (15%).
- In one-third of the programs, the least common form of writing was writing business letters.
- Programs devoted from one-third to one-half of their instructional time to teaching writing.
- With the exception of Manitoba, there was close similarity in the amount of time spent on computers, at less than 20%.

Participants' views on and their satisfaction with the teaching of writing in their programs. This part of the survey asked participants to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of the writing program, as well as their views of the importance of writing in relation to other aspects of literacy. Participants were asked to rate satisfaction statements on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant "very unsatisfied" or "very unimportant," and 5 meant "very satisfied" or "very important." Table 3 shows the results:

[Insert Table 3 here]

Among *all* respondents the findings here were:

- The least satisfactory element of the writing program was access to in-service opportunities (rated 2.7 overall on the 5-point scale - 0.4 points below the next lowest rated items).
- Time available for teaching writing, and time for preparing to teach writing, were the two next lowest rated items (at 3.1).
- The participants' ratings of overall comfort with teaching writing was highest here (4.2). (However, see below regarding the variance noted on this item.)

By *province*, the differences were:

- **Students' interest in writing**: Alberta and NWT programs reported lower estimates (3.1 and 3.0, respectively), while BC programs felt their students' interest in writing was quite high (4.2).
- **The tutors' levels of comfort teaching writing**: Alberta tutors rated their comfort level lower than the regional average (3.8, compared to 4.2), and considerably lower than the BC and Saskatchewan self-ratings (4.6).
- **Materials available for teaching writing**: Saskatchewan respondents rated these lower than the other jurisdictions' respondents, and considerably lower than Alberta's (3.0 vs. 3.9).
- **Satisfaction with the way the tutor had been taught writing as a student**: There was major disagreement on this item, ranging from Manitoba's 2.1 to

Alberta's 3.9 rating. Among the other 3 jurisdictions, only 0.5 separated their ratings.

- **Tutors' self-assessments of their own skills for teaching writing**: Again, Manitoba respondents were least confident (3.6) while Saskatchewan's were most confident of their skills for teaching writing (4.7).

[Insert Table 4 here]

Based on Table 4 we noted that *tutors and instructors only* had the following points of agreement and disagreement:

- **Agreement**:

  Both groups were unhappy with the availability of in-service opportunities.

- **Disagreement** (based on a difference of .2 or greater between tutors and coordinators); ***coordinators*** **were more positive about**:
  - their estimate of the instructors' and tutors' comfort levels in teaching writing;
  - the way they had been taught writing when they were students;
  - their estimate of the instructors' and tutors' present personal writing skills.

- **Disagreement**; ***coordinators*** **were less positive about**:
  - the writing portion of the program;
  - the amount of time for teaching writing;
  - the students' level of interest in writing.

- **The most significant differences were:**
  - *Coordinators* were more positive about the teaching they had experienced as students of writing in school, and their own writing skills, than were tutors and instructors;
  - *Tutors and instructors* were more positive about the time available for teaching writing, students' interest in writing, and the writing portion of the program in general.

We drew two major conclusions about the experience of teaching writing in AL programs, based on this portion of the survey:

- The lack of in-service opportunities in the teaching of writing to literacy students is a problem acknowledged by both tutors and coordinators;
- Tutors and instructors had a lower opinion of and less confidence in their writing skills than their coordinators attributed to them. (In the Delphi portion of the study, however, coordinators often admitted that they had little evidence for their optimistic view.)

The perceived importance of the skills of writing. We wanted to know if there were regional or provincial differences in attitudes toward the importance of writing as a literacy skill. Table 5 shows the results.

[Insert Table 5 here]

We concluded from the data presented in Table 5 that:

- There was high agreement across regions/provinces about the importance of writing as one of the skills of literacy.
- Writing was regarded as somewhat less important than reading, but more important than numeracy, in the ratings of relative importance of literacy skills. (Given the high levels of the values reported [from 4.2 for numeracy to 4.9 for reading] this point may be more of a distinction than a difference.)
- Instructors reported that writing was highly important both in their own lives, and that they regarded it as a "lifeskill" for students.

The free-response questions

The last part of the interview was a series of open-ended questions, intended to gather more information about the respondent and the program. The free-response questions led to the following conclusions:

Attitudes of *students* toward writing: The most common observations about students' attitudes toward writing were:

- students lack confidence as writers;
- students are often fearful of writing;
- over time, and with support, students respond to good instruction by becoming more skilled and comfortable with writing.

Attitudes of *tutors* toward writing:

- instructors understand and accept the value of writing as a literacy skill; **but**
- they are not confident about their own writing skills; and
- they believe there is not enough time allotted to teaching writing in the

program.

Views of *instructors* about writing training, information and resources

- hands-on resources, including materials like *Writing Out Loud* [a practical handbook produced in the *Chapters* project] are needed;
- ideas to motivate students, and specialized materials for groups such as aboriginals, are needed;
- professional development workshops on writing, or a conference on writing, would be valuable.

The Delphi activity

Process. The Delphi process formally commenced on May 11, 1998, with the posing of the first question. (Participants had been recruited, informed and briefed individually by telephone prior.) The Project Coordinator of the *Write to Learn* project served as the moderator, posing the questions, interpreting and summarizing responses, and developing subsequent questions. (She also set the mood of the exchange with her enthusiasm, a fact which the participants mentioned in their comments during the activity.)

In the terms we had learned from van Manen, we were looking here for "... an elucidation of some aspect of the lifeworld [resonating] with our sense of lived life" (van Manen, 1997, p. 27). The "lived life" or lived experience we were after was that of the teacher of an adult literacy student learning to write, or to write better. What we hoped the group would produce in the Delphi process was a "validating circle of inquiry," (p.

27) in which there would be, among all the participants, a lot of phenomenological *nodding*.

Four questions were posed. The following is a sample of the questions, and some of the moderator's comments and summaries:

May 11, 1998: This Delphi survey is an attempt to get more to the "heart" of the research. To begin to gather more information as to the impact of writing on the personal development of learners, I would like you to respond to the following question based on your teaching experience. (A few paragraphs is all I need. Notes in an outline form are fine as well.)

Question #1: In what way(s) do literacy students benefit from the practice of writing? (Consider effects in personal and academic areas, including skills, attitudes, self-perception, confidence and independence.

Please respond by 12:00 p.m. Thursday May 14th. I hope to summarize your responses and post another question before the long weekend...

Moderator's comments regarding replies to #1:

Hello again. Thanks so much for writing back. I wish you could see all of the responses - they're just so right on... Let me give you a bit of an example of what you wrote about the benefits of writing:

* Students are empowered by being able to effectively and politely voice their concerns and grievances to politicians, Income Support Workers, landlords, etc.

* Students experience an increase in self esteem and begin to feel good about what they have written; they are able to see their own progress in their assignments/portfolios.

* There is a definite satisfaction when words begin to flow. Frustration and embarrassment disappear as one becomes able to put words on paper.

* Learning how to write or improving one's writing ultimately improve one's self-image and level of confidence. This positive shift in attitude toward writing and perhaps learning in general could make a learner decide to pursue higher education or explore other options. This would expand one's skills base, lead to a better paying job and financial independence and personal 'freedom'.

* Students often become more reflective, contemplative. Their ability to work through problems improves. They see bigger pictures, becoming more able to recognize that sometimes, the mystery puzzle pieces of their lives can fit together to make some sense.

Crises shrink on the page. Regular journal writing can be meditative. And "medicative" too - good medicine... And watching their creative juices bubble and overflow on the page is a wonder to behold. For the students, such experiences teach them that creativity is not the exclusive province of a privileged few, but a resource each of them can tap into.

* Self-perception is clarified in a way that may not have been possible without the writing process.

* We are seeing changes in attitude about reasons for writing - more than grocery lists and filling in forms. We observe shifts in approaches to writing when the

end result is seen in a positive light. Of course, we do not totally ignore grammar, spelling or punctuation because that's why adult learners are coming to us in the first place. The difference is in getting a safe start to writing with confidence and learning/fine turning new skills.

As I read your ideas I kept thinking, "YES"! [Nodding!] I share your beliefs and experiences. I taught a literacy/life skills program for 3 years for women on Social Assistance and I found writing to be an amazing effective means for the students to learn about themselves and the world around them.

May 14, <u>Question #2:</u> As you can see from the quotes here that you have talked about and used such words as confidence, self-esteem, self understanding, voice, empowerment, independence, problem solving. Are these words or ideas that could be applied to a student when he is learning to read? Does a student gain the same personal skills and understanding through learning to read as he does through learning to write? Is there a difference and if so, what is the difference?

Please respond by 3:00 Tuesday May 19th.

May 22: <u>Question #3:</u> I want to explore the idea further about reading being an internal activity and writing being an external one. Can you elaborate on this idea? In what ways is writing external and how does that effect the student and his interest in learning to write?

Please respond by noon Tuesday May 26th.

May 29, <u>Question #4:</u> Can you describe a student you or a colleague has worked with who has shown signs of personal development through the use of writing? (I understand that reading and writing go hand in hand, but I would like to focus here on writing.) Can you describe a time when you saw a student become or feel more empowered by his ability to write better? I am trying to see if there is a connection between writing and personal growth...

Findings and observations from the Delphi process. The Delphi survey provided depth and resolution to some of the answers received in the telephone interviews. The observations of the participants during and after the exercise convinced us that the experience had been fundamentally constructivist. Unsolicited comments from the participants, examples of them validating by "resonating" with each other's observations, included:

> I feel compelled now to thank you for stirring up such happy thoughts of days gone by. Looking forward to more food for thought!
>
> Thanks for the e-note of appreciation. I have really enjoyed being part of this Delphi project... Keep up the good work!!! I look forward to hearing from you again sometime.
>
> I had such a great time with your questions that I have been checking my e-mails daily and sometimes twice a day lately, anxiously awaiting your last question. I am going out of town for 5 weeks as of Friday and kept hoping I wouldn't miss it. I'm looking forward to reading your papers and will continue thinking about the questions you sent us.

The Delphi added a deeper understanding of some of the experiences of being a writing teacher. As van Manen put it: "...a true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance" (32).

What we heard here was agreement with the view that what gives the teaching of writing its significance is seeing firsthand its power to change the lives of the learners, through their achievement of greater insight and construction of meaning within and about their lives. Statements such as, "Crises shrink on the page. Regular journal writing can be meditative. And 'medicative' too - good medicine..." and " Self-perception is clarified in a way that may not have been possible without the writing process" were powerful affirmations of the impact writing could have when shared in a sensitive community.

Summary and discussion

Summary. Key findings related to the study's research questions included the following:

- With the exception of the amount of time to prepare and to teach writing, practitioners were generally positive about the writing portion of the program.
- The tutoring model is alive and well: the majority of teaching of writing in these literacy programs was one-to-one tutoring, with about one-third group or classroom work.

- Writing receives its share of attention in literacy programs (from one-third to one-half of teaching time), and high ratings in importance from tutors and coordinators as a literacy skill.
- In their own lives, tutors and coordinators recognized writing as an important lifeskill, and rated it nearly as highly in importance for the lives of their students. The Delphi group recognized the value of writing as a literacy skill, and beyond: they reported having observed life changes which mastering writing and *communication* produced in their students.
- The literacy programs included in this survey were stable - or static: most had not changed size from the previous year, but about one-quarter had grown. Few were smaller.
- Among the negative findings, the chief was that tutors and instructors were not positive about how they had themselves been taught to write, and all involved in programs felt in-service opportunities were lacking, but that if they were available they would be enthusiastically accessed.
- A disappointing finding was that up to one-third of instructional time in the writing portion of the program was being spent on spelling and grammar rules. Letter and journal writing, combined, amounted to 43% of instructional time.
- Computers played a minor role in these programs, with an average of less than 20% of writing time spent on a computer, and 36% of programs reporting no student use of computers at all.

What frustrated some of those who do the actual teaching was lack of preparation, and the feeling of personal unreadiness, accompanied and exacerbated by few available PD opportunities, the poor quality of resources and supports, and the perception that their own training in writing was not strong. We thought it was significant that coordinators tended to be more optimistic than tutors about the quality of the work being done with writing in AL programs, and the comfort level of those doing it. Clearly, coordinators did not perceive the same level of urgency for action that the tutors themselves did.

The finding about the state of present PD opportunities (or, rather, the lack of them), we felt, was a particularly significant one. It appears to us that the lack of systematic professional development experiences for AL writing instructors and tutors is a serious weakness of the AL system. Until there are opportunities for conscientious practitioners to address their strongly felt needs for more skills and ideas about writing, the way writing is taught in AL programs will continue to be narrow and uncomfortable, emphasizing rules and errors, and, most seriously, failing to provide the potential benefits of insight, reflection, self-discovery, and self-understanding to learners.

Another important - and encouraging - outcome of this research is the finding that some teachers of writing have discovered that writing *can* be a lifeskill. This group know that the act of writing can produce the same personal benefits as other forms of interpersonal support and intercommunication, while also producing academic learning, if it is defined as a lifeskill in the broadest sense. As we had in ours, some programs have reportedly had success with journals (Kerka, 1996) and sharing/publishing of student writing (O'Rourke, 1992). We found that these teaching practices were uncommon in the programs we studied, but we also found acceptance from tutors of the potential value of

these kinds of activities. What tutors lack is guidance, models and *ideas* that would help them experiment confidently in these areas - measures which we hope our planned PD will supply.

Finally, our conclusion about the participative research methods used with tutors and coordinators in this study was positive. From the enthusiastic responses of the participants we concluded the goal of accurately and sensitively describing the lived experience of being a writing teacher in a literacy program in Western Canada was achieved. Because participants understood quickly what their role was, they also appeared to appreciate the questions we asked. The later Delphi activity similarly seemed to have intuitive validity for the participants, and therefore helped encourage their extraordinary engagement and persistence in what was a time-consuming task.

We suggest that future work along these lines include direct involvement of students, and an opportunity to meet face-to-face with the participants. (Our next phase of the *Write to Learn* project employs students from *Chapters* as trainers.) It would also be helpful if the participants could meet each other, and subsequently participate in the technology-mediated Delphi activity with some background about each other. We intend to pursue further inquiry along these lines in the next phase of the *Write to Learn* project, as we deliver the PD we developed under the influence of this study's processes and results.

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Table 1: Program enrolment, home province or territory*, and job title of survey participants

Question-naire item	AB	BC	MB	NWT	SK	TOTAL
Enrolment	17	11	8	4	9	49
Rural / urban	11 / 6	3 /8	4 / 3	3 / 1	2 / 6	23 / 24
Tutors	1	1	3	0	0	5
Instructors	2	7	6	4	2	21
Coordinators	14	5	7	1	7	34

*AB - Alberta, BC - British Columbia, MB - Manitoba, NWT - Northwest Territories, SK - Saskatchewan

Table 2: Types of writing taught: number of "most" and "least"mentions

	Number of "most" mentions	Number of "least" mentions
Writing with intent to publish or share	2	4
Writing personal stories/letters	13	1
Journal keeping	7	5
Writing letters for business purposes	2	14
Writing to learn spelling and grammar	16	2
Issue related writing	3	6
Free writing/creative writing	3	11
Total	46	43

Table 3: Participants' average ratings of *satisfaction* with aspects of the writing program

	AB	BC	MB	NWT	SK	TOT
Writing portion of the program	3.1	4.2	4.1	3.5	3.4	3.6
Amount of time available to teach writing	2.7	3.5	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.1
Amount of time to prepare to teach writing	3.1	3.5	2.9	3.0	3.1	3.1
Students' interest in writing	3.1	4.2	3.9	3.0	3.6	3.5
Instructor's level of comfort teaching writing	3.8	4.6	4.3	4.0	4.6	4.2
Materials available for teaching writing	3.9	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.0	3.5
Access to in-service opportunities on teaching writing	2.8	2.6	2.4	2.8	3.1	2.7
The way the instructor was taught writing	3.9	3.0	2.1	3.5	3.4	3.3
Instructor's writing skills	4.1	3.9	3.6	3.8	4.7	4.1
Instructor's understanding of writing as part of literacy	3.9	4.3	4.0	4.5	4.3	4.1

Scale: 1 = low, 5 = high satisfaction, importance.

Table 4: Average ratings of *satisfaction* with aspects of the writing program, tutors and instructors compared with coordinators

	Coordinators only	Tutors & instructors	Dif.
Writing portion of the program	3.5	4.0	.5
Amount of time available to teach writing	2.9	3.5	.6
Amount of time to prepare to teach writing	3.2	3.1	.1
Students' interest in writing	3.3	3.9	.6
Instructor's level of comfort teaching writing	4.6	4.3	.3
Materials available for teaching writing	3.7	3.5	.2
Access to in-service opportunities on teaching writing	2.8	2.6	.2
The way the instructor was taught writing	3.6	2.9	.7
Instructor's writing skills	4.2	3.8	.4
Instructor's understanding of writing as part of literacy	4.1	4.2	.1

Rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 5 = highest, most; 1 = lowest, least.

Table 5: Participants' average ratings of the *importance* of aspects of literacy

	AB	BC	MB	NWT	SK	TOT
How important is:						
- writing in your own life	4.4	4.6	4.4	4.3	4.9	4.5
- reading as a skill required for literacy	4.8	5.0	4.7	4.5	5.0	4.9
- writing as a skills required for literacy	4.3	4.6	4.7	4.8	4.8	4.6
- numeracy as a skill required for literacy	4.0	4.0	4.6	4.5	4.1	4.2
- writing as a life skill for students	4.2	4.6	4.4	4.5	4.6	4.4

Rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 5 = highest, most; 1 = lowest, least.

CE 079 124

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