No Grammar Lessons for Grown-Ups: New Pedagogies for Developmental and Adult Education Writers

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Although Language and Literacy research has become an impetus for change in the K-12 arena, Developmental and Adult Education practices have evolved little as a result of such inquiries. Driving instruction away from rote practice of discreet skills, educators have the opportunity to depart from deficit models of education and open up the classroom to the social, cultural, and political contexts in which students best develop their literacy skills. Such a move allows adult students to manipulate and author their experiences while continuing to shape and strengthen their identity, building confidence. As Developmental Education Programs continue to increase in size across the nation, it is time to pay attention to how we as educators can best accommodate students' needs.

Over the past decade, scholars including Perez (1998), Gee (1992), and Zanger (1994) have made tremendous progress in expanding the definition of literacy from the antiquated and hegemonic designation of simply the ability to read and write, to a more comprehensive notion of a contextualized and creative act, capable of generating change. As this stance gained popularity, the pedagogies in elementary and secondary schools began to change to reflect the axiology of a new understanding. Unfortunately, such a shift has not transpired in adult education and developmental writing programs. Scott (2001) describes the protocol of a typical remedial-based program, where students arrive at an institution, are immediately assessed by a standardized diagnostic tool designed to pinpoint the discrete skills they have yet to master, and are then sentenced to several months of worksheet reviews and rote memorization practices that are intended to prepare them for future academic success or career advancement. These programs seldom investigate individual needs, goals, or experiences. They adopt, instead, a deficit model of thinking that focuses on student weakness, rather than building on student strength.

Many scholars have theorized why basic writing programs for adults have neglected research regarding best practice and come to be in such a poor state. Bartholomae (2001) argues that such courses are an expression of the dominant society's desire to reproduce an underclass of citizens and maintain the distinction between normal and deficient. Scott (2001) recognizes that

oppression of this nature may be intentional, but is more likely an uncritical response to institutionalized practices, misconceived to be effective and genuine in their attempts to advance otherwise hopeless individuals.

Educators need to become aware of the dangers of using skills-based writing programs with adults. Not only are such methods, due to their nature of irrelevancy, proven to be ineffective and an impediment to retention and persistence according to the research of many scholars (Curry, 2003; Maloney, 2003; Stygall, 2001), but they also serve to reproduce social, cultural, and educational inequities. Skills-based programs, with their inattention to the development of critical thinking skills and cross-cultural appreciation, do not prepare students to be successful participants in a democratic society. Adopting such a curriculum, rather, perpetuates the pigeon-holing of students as low-performing individuals with little hope of gaining sufficient academic or workforce accomplishment.

Recognizing that skills-based programs fail to meet the needs and expectations of most adult and developmental writers, and in the most extreme cases have damaging, long-lasting results, the remainder of this paper is dedicated to rethinking and imagining anew the possibilities for effective curricular reform. It is a synthesis of the assertions of many scholars who are dedicated to promoting activities that affirm the worth and ability of adults who are learning to write as more effective communicators, activists, and academics. It is my hope that educators and administrators will recognize the urgency for such reforms. As policymakers push for wider participation in higher education and the government demands the eradication of "illiteracy," more underprepared students are entering colleges and universities and more adults are forced into community education programs so that they might enter the workforce and survive. It is an injustice to short-change such individuals with a skills-based program, which will likely leave them no better off than they started.

Curricular Changes: Recognizing the Importance of Sociocultural and Affective Influences

Many scholars, basing their assertions on the most influential research in literacy and linguistics studies (including Freire, 1970, 1983; Bakhtin 1982; and Gee, 1992), argue that curricular reform for adult education and developmental writing programs must first recognize that effective writing skills are not developed independent of sociocultural and emotional influences. Students do not learn in a vacuum, but they are constantly informed by their peers, families and other social networks as to what skills are important to develop and what knowledge is necessary to acquire. Adult learners are especially attuned to the relevancy of the material that is presented to them.

According to Bartholomae (2002), if a student cannot imagine him or herself using the information they learn in a functional or productive matter, they are likely to forget it in a short period of time. Because the practicality of exercises in skills-based programs, worksheet drills and rote memorization is not immediately evident, adult learners are more likely to become discouraged and give up.

When instructors say, "Read this material and then answer questions that follow," and their students are then evaluated on their answers without further discussion, the implied message is that a learner's role is simply to follow directives. Students have little reason to become actively involved and engaged with texts beyond seeking out correct answers to teacher inquiries, and often do not take personal responsibility for their own improvement. This leads to an inadequate understanding of what it takes to develop academic competency, because students are denied the opportunity to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and establish learning goals for themselves. In order for students to become successful writers, they must first master taking active responsibility for their own development. This can be facilitated by allowing students to choose their own texts and author their own goals and objectives with guidance from the instructor.

One way to do this, and set the tone early in the semester, is to allow students to co-author the syllabus. The instructor can use the first class period to engage students in discussions about books that the class might read, why learning to write is important to the students, and what they hope to accomplish. Such dialogue can then be used as a springboard for instructors and students to think about and craft assignments that will be meaningful and engaging. In the same manner, students can be involved in the evaluation process through self- and peer-assessments and through choosing the types of work to include in a final portfolio that displays their best efforts.

Scott (2001) further addresses how to build a program that capitalizes on student experience. The first step is for the instructor to recognize that each student brings unique strengths, which instruction should build upon. Rather than approach students in terms of a deficit model, as if they are broken or lacking, educators need to place them and their prior knowledge at the pedagogical center, according to Bartholomae (2001), who envisions an adult writing program where students harness the power of the "literate arts of the contact zone." Such arts, based on the work of Pratt (1991) include auto-ethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, and vernacular expression, which occur when "cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 177). Bartholomae

insists that developmental writing classrooms must create such a space in order for students to employ their strengths and develop new competencies. Such space necessitates active dialogue and time for students to share about themselves and get to know each other on a personal level.

Allowing for the contact zone to flourish and divorcing from pedagogy that breeds passivity in developmental and adult writing programs permits students and instructors to cultivate a communicative environment vital for success. According to Curry (2003), classroom interaction is the best method for "academic socialization," or preparation to meet future academic expectations. Communication builds the analytical, argumentative, and critical thinking skills necessary for upper-level academic work, in a way that grammar work and basic skill memorization cannot. It also, perhaps more importantly, allows students to examine their role in the larger political and social context of their communities, and become more active participants in their worlds outside of school.

Students who are exposed to communication in the classroom and who develop writing habits that grow out of such interaction, will increase in their ability to effect social change. By sharing their own experiences and listening to those of others, they gain exposure to differing points of view and learn to develop strong arguments. Lillis (2003) posits that talk in the classroom contributes to meaning making as students explore beyond themselves and make new connections with the world. Lillis states that classroom dialogue allows students to bring their own discourse communities into the classroom and into interaction with others. As a result, there can be a creation of new, hybrid texts, which hold the potential to change worldviews and open new spaces for exploration, because students are exposed to dialects, discourses, and stories that may be novel and challenging to their primary literatics. Such critical inquiry techniques and competent research methods, according to Maloney (2003), can make at-risk students confident and competent both within the academy and outside, as they give input to shape societal norms, standards, and practices. Such a transformation, according to Reynolds and Bruch (2002), cannot occur through the study of a stable or empirically definable set of skills, but rather must transpire as the culmination of multiple communication processes that both shape individuals and allow them to manipulate their world.

Further Applications: Creation in the Classroom

For educators who have been using skills-based activities in their classrooms, making the transition to sociocultural methods can be quite difficult. Pedagogy will no longer be focused on checking skills off a list of required abilities. Instead, daily activity will be focused on talk, on meaningful inter-

action with peers, a conversation instead of a monologue. Facilitating such discussion can be a delicate task, and requires one thing above all, a safe classroom environment. As students begin to engage one another, in dialogue then in written word, they must do so within certain boundaries. Scott (2001) speaks of the ground rules for such a project. Students should be free to develop self-generated knowledge without the fear of judgment or ridicule. They should have opportunities to explore their self-identity in an arena where they will be engaged, not closed off or isolated. Educators should be swift to curb habits or expressions that uncritically and unconsciously defend only the advantages of the majority. Furthermore, they should act as cheerleader, quelling attitudes of fear or hopelessness, and inciting the courage to move forward.

Sparks (2002) acknowledges another important consideration for developmental and adult education writing programs. She recognizes, drawing on the work of Ferdman (1991), that every user of literacy is a member of a specific, defined culture with rules, boundaries and an identity deriving from and moderating the symbolic and practical significance of language and literacy. Thus, the degree to which adults will learn to better manipulate the nuances of written language will be directly dependent on how relevant their writing accomplishments will be to their everyday, functional life. The implication for the classroom, then, may be that student writing should be focused on the practical (e.g. writing a letter to their congressperson to appeal for change, composing an informational booklet for other members of their community discussing the prevention of HIV, and so on). Students should have the opportunity to write about issues that are immediately relevant to them and their communities, allowing educators to build on the strengths their students already possess.

Some might question how such tasks will prepare students for higher-order writing, such as research papers, critical essays, and argumentative pieces. Teaching writing as a process has been the dominant pedagogical model for composition since the late 1970s. This process typically involves novice students first choosing from available topics given their interests and prior knowledge. Through freewriting and drafting on these topics, exploring and manipulating them, they often discover their stance, argument or purpose. After receiving and providing peer comments on one another's work and in coordination with the professor and other resources, they revise their work and produce several more directed drafts, which result in a clearer, more concise and meaningful piece. As the semester progresses and students acquire more skills through guided experience, their assignments typically involve fewer cycles of revision and the student is prepared to take on more difficult

projects. In this manner, instructors use the strengths of the students, their interests and experiences to move them towards advanced ventures.

Maloney (2003) encourages educators not to forget about one of the most important dialogues that can occur in the classroom, reading. She supports the introduction of texts in the classroom that are rhetorically varied, but thematically connected, so that students can contextually frame the works and respond by such methods as comparison and contrast, analysis and synthesis. Bartholomae (2002) also calls for exploration of multiple genres of text in the classroom, claiming that students develop as writers as they begin to systematically recognize and analyze the relationship of their texts to those of others. Traditionally, in many postsecondary writing classes, instructors assign students passages to read and follow-up by asking students to express the author's main idea, message, or argument and reiterate it in an assignment. Such tasks often prevent students from participating in reader's response; they do not promote a dialogue between reader and writer. Literacy theorists have stressed, however, that the full meaning of a text develops as a result of this dialogue (e.g., Nystrand, 1989). As Berthoff (1984) writes, "The symbol user, the knower, the learner, is integral to the process of making meaning" (p. 751).

In the beginning, specific texts can be self-selected from a list of possible options provided by an instructor, allowing students the opportunity to choose something of interest that is engaging and relevant. The class can participate in read alouds to facilitate awareness of processing such as graphophonic, phonemic, lexical, syntactic, conceptual, discourse structure, and prior knowledge. Graphophonic awareness, for instance, refers to the recognition of sounds and symbol correspondences that allow readers to decode and comprehend texts. With this knowledge, certain signs cue a reader to the production of particular sounds that lead to meaningful words and phrases.

Classroom reading activities provide an opportunity for teachers to examine miscues, pauses, and inappropriate phrasing in order to determine what information to provide. They may initiate dialogue before the reading to activate prior knowledge or divide texts into pieces to give the reader the opportunity to understand information from a complex sentence. Finally the instructor can provide feedback to the reader after a section has been read to provide associations to other material or to expand on the information. As the students get used to this process, they can move to reading progressively more difficult texts, and transfer their new knowledge as their reading and writing skills grow in concert. Gradual exposure to examples of more sophisticated texts can also serve to prepare students for subsequent requirements in composition classes and other core curriculum courses; whereas in

skills-based programs, students have little to no idea of the nature of future expectations in writing.

Another activity that has gained approval among researchers of primary and secondary grades is that of storytelling. Storytelling can be used to teach several skills including identifying main ideas and recognizing the structure of a "good" tale. As groups share and discuss their experiences, they can also begin to recognize the differences between cultures and communities, see the value in the practices of other people, and question why things are done in a certain manner. As a class community, then, students can scaffold each other's learning as they critically interpret real life situations and collectively remember events that have transpired.

Although these are but a few of the many visionary pedagogical practices espoused by best practice researchers, the main themes are clear. Classroom practice needs to be intimately related and relevant to student life experiences. Writing exercises and activities consisting of decontextualized repetition of discrete skills do not have the power to develop critical thinking skills or the awareness of how composing fits within the exchanges and boundaries of society. Learning is dictated by belief systems, institutions, relationships, and social experiences and cannot be viewed as independent of cultural norms and values. As students participate in talk in the classroom, a mini-cosmos of society, they begin to solidify their identity and values, and learn skills to negotiate the principles and standards of others. These are valuable tools for both within and outside of the academy. Current programs of watered-down grammar curricula serve to conceal such tools from adult education and developmental writers, refusing to challenge, confront, or negotiate student difficulty. If such programs continue to refuse to listen to the dominant research findings on the matter, there will continue to be a schism between basic writers and mainstream students, one that will continue to perpetuate deficit thinking and its detrimental consequences.

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