Research in Developmental Writing Courses and Implications for Practice

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This article briefly surveys the literature on ways that developmental writing students learn; reports on student learning style research carried out in developmental writing classrooms at Texas A&M University-Kingsville and Southwest Texas Junior College, using the Productivity Environmental Preference Survey*; suggests specific strategies for teaching the writing process with regard to our students' learning styles; and discusses cooperative learning, a classroom-tested pedagogy for responding to our students' learning preferences.*

Increasingly, postsecondary institutions have been experiencing an influx of students who, a generation ago, may not have had the opportunity to continue their education beyond high school. Many of these students enroll in developmental writing courses. Faced with the challenging task of educating large numbers of nontraditional and underprepared college students, writing teachers and program administrators have been adapting and modifying the ways they teach writing and structure their classroom activities. In this paper we 1) briefly survey the literature on ways that developmental writing students learn; 2) report on research conducted on student learning styles at two Hispanic serving institutions; 3) suggest some specific strategies for teaching the writing process with regard to our students' learning styles; and 4) discuss cooperative learning, a classroom-tested and research-supported pedagogy that meshes with our students' learning styles.

Survey of Literature

Much literature discussing the learning styles of developmental writing students is based on the many years of classroom practices and experiences of veteran teachers. A number of teachers/researchers– among them Walter Ong, Lynn Troyka, and Shirley Brice Heath– have commented on the extent to which many of our entering college

students are products of an oral culture. Troyka (1982) observes that many entering students–especially developmental students–are social and more comfortable dealing with the oral rather than the written word. Just being more aware of this student orientation can start us thinking about ways to turn our students' tendencies to their and our advantage in the classroom. In addition, Bruffee (1993) has discussed the ways that composition theory has been influenced by the field of social construction, which emphasizes the benefits of various experiences associated with the speaking/hearing learning style: the idea that some kinds of truth can be negotiated and talked through to a conclusion; the transactional nature of meaning; the importance of collaboration and of peer response in the composing process; and the development of communities of writers. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words* (1983) is a comparative study of how language is used in three culturally different communities in the Carolina hill country. Basing her conclusions on field work, ethnographies, and comparative social research, Heath emphasizes the cultural constructedness of knowledge and of how people of different cultures have different beliefs about how learning ought to take place. Awareness of our own socialization and of the ways in which we are all culturally inscribed can only help us become more aware of our own and our students' cultural backgrounds.

Learning Styles Research

To attempt to support the observations of Ong, Troika, Heath, and Bruffee, for several years we collected data on the learning styles of over 200 students in the highest developmental writing course, that is, the course immediately preceding the regular first-semester college writing course. The data collection took place at Texas A&M University-Kingsville in the 1990's and at Southwest Texas Junior College at Uvalde in 2006. Both institutions are located in South Texas and serve a large number of Hispanic students, many of whom are first-generation college students. For data collection on learning styles we used the *Productivity Environmental Preference Survey* (*PEPS*), which asks students a series of questions about the conditions under which they learn best and the various factors which affect their learning. The *PEPS* asks questions about four predominant learning

styles, based on the physical senses used by the learner when acquiring new information: tactile-kinesthetic; hearing and speaking; reading and writing; and visual.

Our major findings are broken down into five areas. First, 51 percent of our students said that they learned better with an authority figure present in the classroom, and only 1 percent said that they learned better without an authority figure. Second, 70 percent (strongest preference in survey) of our students indicated a high preference for structure in learning activities. Third, listening was listed as very important in the learning of 44 percent of our students, and less than 1 percent said that listening was of little importance in learning. Fourth, 43 percent of our students indicated that they learned well working and speaking with peers, and only 3 percent said that they learned best alone. Finally, 36 percent of the respondents indicated that they learned better through tactile-kinesthetic activity, rather than passive "being talked at," with fewer than 6 percent indicating they did not learn well through tactile-kinesthetic activity.

Strategies for Teaching the Writing Process

What, then, are some practical strategies for teaching writing to students who learn well by speaking and listening, who are peer-oriented, and who like hands-on activities? One general teaching mode that may be effective is the "environmental" style described by George Hillocks, Jr., in his *Research on Written Composition* (1986). The environmental style is characterized in part by "materials and problems selected to engage students with each other in specifiable processes important to some particular aspect of writing," and "activities… conducive to high levels of peer interaction concerning specific tasks" (p. 122). An example of the environmental teaching style would be using a peer response activity in the classroom, with students using a set of questions to guide them on what to look for when responding to classmates' drafts. In fact, Hillocks states that studies have suggested that the environmental teaching style is more effective than other commonly used teaching methods, such as the traditional lecture method.

We would now like to focus on prewriting, revision, and proof-reading/editing, and suggest some strategies that may connect

with students who share some of the learning styles we have been discussing.

In the prewriting stage many students may perform more effectively with invention strategies oriented toward speaking and listening. For example, focused brainstorming sessions in peer groups of three or four, in which students talk through ideas and get immediate reaction, may be productive. Another strategy is one suggested by Mike Rose (1983). Students listen to a short talk about a particular subject, and then are asked to write a reaction to it: agreeing, disagreeing, adding to the ideas, and making connections. This activity not only integrates listening into the invention stage, but it also has the added benefit of giving our students practice in a skill—note-taking—which they must develop in order to be successful in college. A variation on this exercise is to have students discuss in small groups their reactions to the talk, rather than (or in addition to) having them write down their reactions.

In the revision stage of the composing process, a technique that works well is the old, proven method of having a face-to-face conference with the student and asking open-ended questions which allow the student to talk about ways to build on the strengths of the essay. Murray (2004) has written on his many years of experience with this conferencing method. Some of his questions to student writers include the following: What did you learn from this piece of writing? What do you intend to do in the next draft? What surprised you in the draft? Where is this piece of writing taking you? What do you like best in this piece of writing? What questions do you have of me?

In the proofreading/editing stage of the composing process, students could benefit by reading their essay drafts aloud or by having someone read their drafts back to them. Bartholomae (1980) observes that students who either read aloud their own drafts or listen to them being read tend to catch many oversights that they would probably not catch by reading silently.

Cooperative Learning

In addition to suggesting strategies for teaching the writing process, we also suggest a classroom organizational structure for connecting with students who tend to exhibit the learning styles that our survey

documented. This structure is cooperative learning. Of all the pedagogical approaches to working effectively with nontraditional students—or any students—the one that holds the most promise, the most potential, and even the best track record, is cooperative learning. This approach to teaching and learning is tailor-made for students who want an authority figure, who want structure, who learn well through speaking and listening, who are peer oriented, and who are tactile-kinesthetic learners. One of the most widely researched classroom strategies, cooperative learning has gained more attention at the post-secondary level over the last two decades partly as a response to the increasing numbers of nontraditional students attending college. Between 1898 and 1989, over 375 studies have been conducted on the effects of cooperation on performance. According to David and Roger Johnson (1989), two of the best known and widely published proponents of cooperative learning, "cooperative efforts result in higher achievement and greater productivity than do competitive or individualistic efforts" (p. 55). An overview of cooperative learning follows.

Cooperative learning is the use of small, highly structured, student-led learning teams in the classroom. It can best be understood in terms of three classroom goal structures, or the ways in which teachers structure the interactions among students. The three goal structures are competitive, individualistic, and cooperative. In the competitive goal structure, the interaction among students is negative in the sense that one student's success depends on other students being less successful. The teacher who announces on the first day of class that only five percent of the students in the class will receive an A is using the competitive goal structure. In the individualistic goal structure there is neutral or no interaction among students. That is, one student's performance is neither helped nor hindered by another student's performance. Success is determined by achieving a pre-set standard. Most classrooms today are probably oriented in this way. In the cooperative goal structure there is a positive interaction among students in each learning team. That is, the success of each student on the team enhances the success of every other student on the team.

According to David and Roger Johnson and Karl Smith (1998) of

the University of Minnesota, five basic elements must exist for cooperative learning to be successful:

1. *Positive Interdependence*. Students must realize that they need each other in order to complete a group task. The success of one enhances the success of all group members. Four common ways to ensure positive interdependence are to establish a common goal, give each team member a role, require shared resources, and provide team rewards.

2. *Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction*. Students work together in small groups, usually consisting of three or four students per group. They help, assist, encourage, and support each other's efforts to learn.

3. *Individual Accountability*. Although the performance of the team depends on each member's contribution, each student is assessed individually and is held accountable for learning the content of the course. While students may receive some group grades, they do major tests and assignments individually. Peer responding to drafts of essays works well within the context of cooperative learning.

4. *Cooperative Skills*. Team members learn appropriate communication, leadership, trust, decision-making, and conflict management skills in order to develop the social skills needed to collaborate effectively with others.

5. *Group Processing*. Team members are given time and are taught self-assessment procedures to analyze how well the team is performing while pursuing the academic objective of the task. Two basic questions are "What are one or two specific activities that we did well in today's class?" and "What is one activity that we can do better next time?"

Some educators who have not been formally trained in cooperative learning may have some misconceptions about this pedagogical alternative. Some misconceptions, along with the actual findings of practitioners and researchers, are:

- "The teacher gives up authority and control in the classroom." In using cooperative learning the teacher does not relinquish authority and control in the classroom. In fact, many practitioners of cooperative learning discover, perhaps ironically, that they have more control in the classroom because the activities are highly structured and each student must assume a role and participate.

- "The teacher cannot cover as much content." While it is true that some initial class time must be used in forming student teams and explaining cooperative learning, over the length of a semester there is little difference between the amount of material covered in a cooperative learning classroom and that covered in a more traditional classroom.

- "Cooperative learning is the latest fad in colleges of education." In fact, research in cooperative learning extends back to the 1890s, with over five hundred studies covering business, the military, and all levels of education, kindergarten through graduate and professional school.
- "Cooperative learning changes the content of what teachers teach." It does not; the content of what we teach remains the same. The only way in which cooperative learning changes content is that it involves more students more actively in learning the content and in the process helps students learn important interpersonal skills.
- "Cooperative learning replaces lecture, and I am being paid to tell students what I know, and I feel comfortable lecturing." Cooperative learning does not replace lecture; it complements lecture. Moreover, telling is not necessarily teaching. Even the most ardent proponents of cooperative learning use it fifty or sixty percent of the time in the classroom. Concerning feeling comfortable, we concede that trying cooperative learning for the first time—and we really mean using it over several weeks—made us apprehensive and somewhat uncomfortable. The results, however, have been overwhelmingly positive.

How do students like cooperative learning? In our experience and that of our colleagues who use it, most students like it and work well with it. Interestingly, initial resistance is likely to come from two groups of students—the very high achievers and the very low achievers. The former believe that they will be pulling the wagon for their group. The latter are flustered because they discover that they actually have to do work in the classroom, and the pressure on them is much greater than just "teacher" pressure. The pressure is from peers! In time, resistance from both groups diminishes as students see the value and effectiveness of cooperative learning. Over the years we have received many unsolicited positive comments about cooperative learning from students in their journal writing and course evaluations.

What, then, are the major research findings in cooperative learning? Johnson and Johnson (1989) have compiled data from hundreds of studies on cooperative learning and its effects on students. They have drawn three major conclusions. First, cooperative learning, properly structured, enhances the efforts of all students to achieve. Second, cooperative learning tends to promote positive relationships. Third, cooperative learning promotes psychological health and social competence.

We add a final word about extending the results of our research beyond the developmental writing classroom. Based on many years' experience teaching both developmental writing and regular first-year writing at both the community college and the open-admissions or nearly open admissions regional university, we are reasonably confident that practically everything we report here can apply to teaching writing and structuring classrooms at most open admissions (or nearly open admissions) colleges and universities around the country.

Conclusion

Much of our research is preliminary and raises all sorts of questions. For instance, at what point does a generalization become a stereotype? What do we do if research data contradict our gut feelings or instincts or intuition? In what ways do empirical data and statistics belie the enormous complexities involved in language, culture, and learning? Do students learn in different ways under different circumstances or when learning different types of information? How much transfer of culture occurs during the educational process, especially in parts of the country which are bicultural? What effects do several years of college attendance have on student learning styles? Suppose a group of students is oriented toward listening as a way of learning. Would these students benefit more from listening to a poorly prepared lecture or from reading a stimulating, well-organized piece of written discourse? To what extent do our own unconscious cultural values influence us in privileging one mode of teaching or learning over another? To what extent should we attempt to use a teaching or learning style which at first may feel uncomfortable?

Community colleges and open-admissions universities will probably see more nontraditional and underprepared student enrollments in the future. So postsecondary teachers will have to accept the challenge of doing the best we can to help students fulfill their potential. Conducting classroom research, analyzing the data, and being willing to try alternative pedagogical strategies can help us and our students to be better teachers and learners.

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