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Professional Development as a Novice Tutor: Navigating the Process Approach

The challenges of implementing the process approach in a real-life setting are explored through the eyes of a MA TESOL student. While working her 2nd semester as an individual tutor for a developmental writer, the author discovers unexpected interdependencies among tutor, student, classroom teacher, and curriculum designer. This article dissects that experience, reflecting on specific challenges to draw insight on the effectiveness of the process approach with L2 students and the pedagogical implications for a preservice teacher.

As a part of my MA TESOL training at San José State University (SJSU), I worked as a tutor in the Language Development Center (LDC). There I saw firsthand how students struggled with the writing process. And, as a novice tutor, I saw how much I struggled to help them. The idea for this article grew out of that experience—an experience that gave me insights into the interactive roles of tutor-teacher, tutor-curriculum designer, and tutor-student, particularly when working with L2 students. The experience also gave me the opportunity to benchmark my own professional development as a second language teacher at a time when I was a novice teacher.

Working With Thomas on Process

The writing competency requirements at SJSU share characteristics with other universities in the CSU system. At SJSU, upperclassmen must pass a test of writing skills before they can proceed with their major area of study. If a student fails the writing test, the student must enroll in and successfully complete a 10-week writing course. I tutored students in a two-credit writing lab that is offered as an optional elective in conjunction with this writing course. The purpose of the lab is to coach the students through the composition steps of three essays that comprise their final portfolios and to help them plan for a reflective cover letter that is the final in-class assignment.

My tutee was enrolled in the developmental writing lab in the spring semester of 2011. Thomas (a pseudonym) was an Art major. He also fits the typical profile of a "Generation 1.5" student: He emigrated from Thailand with his family when he was 7, spoke Thai at home, and attended U.S. public schools.

Thomas transferred from a California community college before entering SJSU as a junior. I tutored Thomas for two 1-hour sessions per week for 10 weeks, a total of 20 hours. During this time, Thomas wrote three essays for his writing class using a multidraft process approach. These essays, plus an in-class final essay, constituted his final portfolio for the course. Before working with Thomas, I had little experience with a multidraft process approach; during my undergraduate work I did little drafting and revision on my own essays and none of my classes used portfolios.

As a novice tutor, I readily accepted the strong emphasis on meaning rather than form in the process approach. However, I was surprised at how difficult it was for me as a tutor to help Thomas *find* his point. His ideas seemed unorganized and disconnected and it was difficult to know where to start to help him clarify his meaning. I had already tutored freshmen students the previous semester and I had found it relatively easy to know how to proceed. However, Thomas was facing much more complex assignments than my prior tutees—assignments that required him to analyze rhetorical strategies in a written document from his major field of study.

I decided to start our work together by teaching a *default strategy*. Collins (1998) argues that default writing strategies have a positive purpose because they are strategies that writers can fall back on when the writing task becomes too difficult. In teaching this strategy to my tutee, I realized the "default strategy" concept also applied to me as a novice tutor. Because I was more confident explaining it, my default strategy was to teach Thomas a basic essay formula that includes an introduction with thesis statement, topic sentences in paragraphs, supporting evidence, and conclusion. (However, as my skills increase, I will certainly become more comfortable varying this template, depending on the type of assignment and the writing challenges my tutee faces.) In addition to teaching traditional organizational structure, I consciously put on the hat of an interested reader, asking such questions as "What do you mean here?" and "How could you explain this idea further to your reader?" After we worked through two revision cycles, I could see that giving time for revision and feedback was helpful to Thomas to gain control of his ideas and organization. He had clearer topic sentences, less extraneous content, and better-developed paragraphs. The revision cycles gave him time to clarify what he meant.

Applying Tutoring Tools

Tutors are fortunate to receive a variety of tutoring tools at the LDC to guide their tutoring sessions. As a novice tutor, I found some of these tools helpful and others difficult to use. On the helpful side, for each student's writing assignment, the curriculum designer, a professor at SJSU, included an outline and format instructions; these instructions were detailed and contained useful clarifying examples. For example, for one assignment the curriculum designer suggested two different ways to organize body paragraphs. During our tutoring sessions, I kept referring to these instructions to make sure we were on track with what was expected. We also received copies of students' class schedules with due dates for assignments to help us link our tutoring objectives to the

students' deadlines. However, as a novice tutor I would have liked even tighter collaboration between the classroom teachers and writing lab tutors. One way this collaboration could be accomplished is for the tutor to meet several times during the course with the classroom teacher to discuss the student's progress. The more that tutors can understand the assignment requirements and the teacher's expectations, the better.

Conversely, I found it difficult to use two learning tools that the LDC recommended. The first was a learning log that outlined a prototypical revision cycle (identifying gaps, finding resources, developing understanding, and applying this knowledge), and the second was a weekly activities worksheet suggesting coaching activities for each tutoring session. While these tools were meant to give structure and focus to the tutoring sessions, I found them difficult to consistently implement because the student's progress did not match the session's recommended activity. With more experience, I will be able to internalize the concepts behind such tools and then flexibly adjust the lessons' priorities to better fit the immediate challenges of the student.

The process approach is based on the belief that writing can be best taught when it is broken down into smaller, individual steps, including prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. The process approach also helped me as a tutor: Breaking writing into steps helped me to think of appropriate teaching techniques for each step and to give priority in my feedback to meaning, not form, during the earlier drafts. However, Caudery (1995) reminds us that research shows that the process of good writing is not linear, but circular. For example, when writing this article, I circled back to the prewriting step multiple times. But trying to teach a struggling writer that the writing process is circular makes a difficult skill even more so. I can see the value of simplicity when working with tutees, that is, taking a linear, stepped approach while the student gains the skills. However, dividing the complex writing process into steps is not the total answer. Collins (1998) argues that the multiple revision cycles of the process approach are meaningless to the struggling writer if that writer does not develop learning strategies, such as how to organize one's thoughts or elaborate one's points, so each cycle can be improved. When we were working on the organization of one of Thomas's paragraphs, I introduced him to the prewriting idea of bubble mind maps. Being an artist, he responded to this visual technique since he could draw his major, then minor, ideas to graphically represent an organizational structure. In the next session, Thomas had much clearer topic sentences for several of his paragraphs, so I thought that his writing benefited from this technique. Bubble mind maps tapped one of my student's strengths, plus Thomas had circled back to the prewrite stage in the middle of his second draft without even knowing it. As a tutor, I understand the value of a more structured linear approach when working with struggling writers, but I see that with practice, these writers can use these steps in a circular fashion.

Navigating the Social Nature of Writing

A process approach to writing also tends to make writing a social, collaborative process through revising, reflecting, and discussing with others. A

number of researchers have embraced the social-cognitive aspects of writing, such as Collins (1998) and Keh (1990). Discussing one's writing during the process of development provides stronger scaffolding than the product approach that is done more as an independent exercise.

Thomas had several ways to take advantage of social interaction to improve his writing. In addition to 20 hours of individual tutoring in the writing lab, he had two peer reviews in class and two individual conferences with his teacher. On his own initiative, he also visited the campus Writing Center and asked friends to review his work. In our tutoring sessions, Thomas and I discussed the input he got from his individual teacher conferences and peer feedback and we analyzed this input for common threads and repeating comments. I clearly saw the value of increasing the resources available to the writer by redefining the writing process as a collaborative, not a solitary, one. The 20 hours we worked one-on-one is a luxury that classroom teachers do not have. When I become a classroom teacher, I will certainly use this insight; I'll make time for student-teacher conferences and peer-review training and I will encourage students to seek the help of multiple experienced tutors.

Working With Teacher Feedback

Self-assessment is also incorporated into the LDC tutoring agenda. Students write personal objectives for the 10-week course in the areas of rhetorical, lexical, and grammatical skills and e-mail these writing goals to their instructors. In retrospect, I think that while we discussed Thomas's objectives, I could have worked with him more on how to prioritize and achieve them during the 10-week course. Collins (1998) claims that this collaborative approach was so important that he focused his research on "the ways students and teachers co-construct an understanding of writing problems and strategic ways of thinking of overcoming them" (p. 58). At the end of the 10-week course, it was evident that I inaccurately assessed Thomas's work because his completed portfolio did not earn a passing grade. Part of the problem for his poor performance was writing anxiety on the final exam—a timed, in-class portfolio cover letter. Another part of the problem was that I did not have a clear understanding of how close he was to receiving a non-passing grade. I could have better used his teacher's written feedback and called the teacher to get an indication of how well he was doing. It is clear to me that I need to more actively support my future tutees' areas of improvement and engage with their teachers to make sure I have enough information to accurately assess their performance.

Of course research has shown that teacher feedback can be problematic; Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) were early scholars who argued that it is ineffective to comment on essays because these comments produce no improvement. They argued that students do not understand the teacher's feedback, or, even if they do, they do not use the feedback to improve their writing. On the other hand, Ferris (2003) argues that, based on the conclusions from a broad range of research, teacher feedback plays an important role in improving L2 student writing. With no clear answers, the graduate TESOL student must

grapple with conflicting research, diverse teachers' opinions, and personal experience to develop his or her own approach to giving feedback.

Striking the right balance between feedback on content or form proved to be challenging for me. In the early drafts, there were plenty of content problems to tackle and I did not think that I had enough time to give much feedback on more mechanical issues. For example, when development of a particular paragraph was needed, I gave content-based feedback with the question, "What kinds of writing are typical for the field of art?" By my using indirect feedback techniques, Thomas remains responsible for the revision with, one hopes, enough guidance that he knows how to proceed. Ferris's research (2003) indicates that her L2 students prefer indirect feedback to the teachers appropriating their text and rewriting it. In addition, Fregeau (as cited in Williams, 2003) reports that written feedback, coupled with student-teacher conferencing, is an effective way to guide ESL students. When I begin teaching, I will set the expectation for my students that they are responsible for thinking about the feedback they receive and how they plan to respond to it.

Because Thomas's writing had many mechanical errors, my feedback deviated from a strict focus on meaning alone. In the spirit of collaboration, I did ask Thomas when he wanted feedback on form and he said that he preferred to get it once the content issues were addressed. On his second draft I noted that 7 out of the 19 comments I made focused on form issues, such as verb tense, sentence structure, and word choice. We discussed some of these in person the next time we met, but I found that this kind of direct feedback was ineffective because he could not self-edit his mistakes. As the deadline for handing in the paper loomed, I felt pressured to give direct, form-focused feedback because I could see that the student did not have adequate knowledge, time, or, perhaps, motivation to make the needed revisions.

With more experience, I will know how to more effectively tailor my feedback to each student's skill level. One technique that I am interested in trying next semester is to focus on a couple of major form problems and develop self-editing strategies with the tutee. For example, Thomas often did not form the past tense of verbs correctly. To address this problem, I would try this approach:

1. Find several verbs that should be in the past tense and correct them;
2. Highlight other verbs that should be changed, but do not give the answer; and
3. Ask Thomas to make the corrections himself on the next revision.

In this way, he inductively learns the correct form and may be more likely to recall it in the future.

As a novice tutor I found giving feedback to student writers complex and difficult. As a MA TESOL student I would have enjoyed the opportunity to learn how to give feedback through a "case study" method of instruction. Case methods have been used extensively in medicine, law, and business and I think they would be equally successful for MA TESOL. Discussing a case study of a real teacher-student feedback situation would be stimulating and productive for

preservice teachers. It would be a way to unite theory, research, and classroom interaction to help prospective teachers formulate their own philosophies.

Conclusion

My first experience in tutoring a Generation 1.5 upperclassman using the process approach led me to make several observations regarding the interactions between student, teacher, curriculum designer, and tutor. I believe that tutors should modify the process approach when working with ESL students in order to provide a balance between form-focused and content-focused feedback throughout the development of an essay. In addition, the writing task assigned in Thomas's class was detailed rather than free form and self-developed. By making the expectations detailed and easy to understand, the curriculum designer leverages the resource of the tutor to keep the essay development on track. Also, I see that it is essential for the classroom instructor to make expectations of assignments clear, especially when sending students to tutoring, and to see the tutor as a partner in helping the students become better writers. Likewise, the tutor needs to proactively communicate with the classroom teacher about the tutee's progress. The teacher's written feedback, grading rubrics, and developmental insights gleaned in individual conferences are all valuable input for a tutor to appropriately help the student. Such collaboration would not only help transform a struggling writer into a more confident one, but also a novice tutor into an effective ESL teacher.

Author

Sharon Stranahan is a MA TESOL candidate, Spring 2012, at San José State University. She holds a BA in English and an MBA. Sharon sees teaching ESL students as an interesting and challenging second career, having spent more than 30 years as a corporate marketing executive.

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