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The Writing Crisis and How to Address It through Developmental Writing Classes

Abstract

Since high school students are failing to master writing proficiency, developmental writing programs at the college level have become increasingly necessary. This article explains the lack of readiness with which students are entering college and the workplace, examines the reasons students are having trouble writing, and describes elements of effective writing instruction for developmental writing programs. By combining self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) with peer and teacher feedback, developmental writing students will receive a combination of cognitive and affective support. Students will be able to raise writing achievement, improve motivation and self-efficacy in writing, and develop more positive writing experiences.

Introduction

A great number of students in America today are reaching the college level without writing proficiency skills. On the NAEP 2011 writing test, only 24% of twelfth graders performed at a proficient level, with a staggering 73% of students achieving basic or below basic levels; a mere 3% of students achieved advanced status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). While ACT (2012) has reported slight increases in scores for college and career readiness, specifically in math and science scores, many students are still unprepared for post-high school writing demands. The report references the gap between expected student writing proficiency and actual data, making an important point regarding college readiness and lifelong success: in order for America's students to compete worldwide and obtain well-paying jobs, they will need stronger skills than those they currently possess.

Coker and Lewis (2008) further analyze the link between poor writing skills in today's students and their chances of long-term achievement. Employees may be hired or not hired, and promoted or not promoted, based upon their writing skills. Indeed, the National Commission on Writing (2005) reports that nearly two-thirds of employees in professional positions will utilize writing as an important

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aspect of their jobs, such as in areas of communication and presentation. Most professional employees possess the needed writing skills, but up to thirty percent are "below standard" (National Commission on Writing, 2005). Today's students with poor writing skills are tomorrow's employees who will negatively impact the ability of US businesses to compete at a global level.

Developmental writing courses exist to help underprepared students succeed in higher-level writing courses. In a study that measured the effectiveness of developmental writing classes in a community college in Florida, Southard and Clay (2004) measured results of both developmental and non-developmental students' success in a college English composition class. All developmental students, who were identified based on achievement on the Florida College Placement Test, had taken a developmental course prior to the composition class. Since mean grades between the two separate groups of students showed no significant differences, the researchers concluded that the developmental course addressed deficiencies adequately enough to prepare students to succeed as much as their non-developmental counterparts.

However, not all developmental writing courses have been able to address students' needs. While there are countless higher education institutions offering developmental writing courses as a way to assist students in becoming more proficient writers, it is important to address specifically what students' limitations are and identify both strategic and affective approaches to be utilized in such programs.

At the Core of the Problem: Difficulties in Persuasive and Argumentative Writing

Perhaps the area of greatest need in improving students' skills is in persuasive and argumentative writing. On the 2007 NAEP writing test, persuasive writing accounted for 40% of the writing tested by twelfth-graders, a higher percentage than the tasks for measuring narrative and informative skills (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). However, despite the abundance of persuasive writing required on the test, students scored poorly in this genre. Only 60% of the students tested received a rating of "sufficient" or more on persuasive writing tasks, with only a combined 26% receiving "skillful" (21%) or "excellent" (5%). That leaves 39% of students receiving the ratings of "uneven," "insufficient," or "unsatisfactory" (Salahu-Din, et al, 2008). While 40% of the twelfth grade 2011 NAEP test was also allotted to persuasive writing tasks (National Assessment Governing Board, 2010), the 2011 report did not break down how students performed on individual genres of writing.

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In a study conducted by Ferretti, MacArthur, and Dowdy (2000), despite an intervention in persuasive writing, students continued to produce "minimally developed" (p. 700) responses with only 54% of students attempting to address alternative viewpoints. This omission is echoed by Kuhn and Crowell (2011); they cite students' preference for focusing on writing about their favored argument while essentially ignoring the opposing side except to occasionally list a negative aspect of it. Even when an attempt was made to address the opposing viewpoint, students frequently omitted rebutting or fully addressing it.

The failure to address another perspective in both persuasive and argumentative writing has been shown as a common and serious weakness in student compositions. Students may avoid including or developing alternative perspectives in their writing because they believe these will weaken their arguments (Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009), although neglecting the opposing viewpoint entirely is far worse. In addition, students often fail to consider critical questions about their own arguments, resulting in "shallow" writing (p. 587).

Haynes (2011), in a policy brief about the literacy crisis written for the Alliance of Excellent Education, stresses the importance for students to learn to write "coherent and persuasive arguments based on evidence" (p.3), citing the connection between the ability to do this with college and workplace success. Perhaps most alarming, on a nation-wide level, is the direct line Haynes draws between literacy skills and economic success; she states that "dramatic improvements" will be needed for the United States to "maintain its position at the top" (p. 1).

Many Students Are Not Receiving Quality Writing Instruction

In *Writing Next*, Graham and Perin (2007b) recognize the lack of guidance that educators have in providing appropriate writing instruction to their students, accounts for the lack of appropriate training with which students are provided. In fact, many high school English teachers report that they were never explicitly taught how to teach writing during their teacher educational programs; instead, they utilized state standards, other teachers, and continuing education classes or workshops to inform their methods of writing instruction (Hochstetler, 2007). Fearn and Farnan (2007) and Troia (2006) also acknowledge the disconnect, stating that teachers need to be taught how to teach writing, and current pre-service training is not equipping teachers with the pedagogical knowledge they need to be successful.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many instructors are uncomfortable with teaching writing because they are not confident in their own writing abilities. Mathers, Benson, and Newton (2006) interviewed pre-service

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teachers in order to discover what they believed about writing success as it related to effort, natural ability, and other factors. Out of the 192 subjects interviewed, 109 rated themselves as poor writers. The study revealed that 40% of the subjects felt that the influence of others, mainly teachers, was the most important factor leading to writing success; 28% believed it was natural ability, and 32% rated effort as the top predictor.

This study reveals some very disturbing information. If 40% of the pre-service teachers felt that a teacher's instruction was the most important factor in determining writing success, but nearly 60% of these future teachers were unconfident in their own writing abilities, logic dictates that it will be unlikely that they will be able to deliver the quality of instruction necessary to help their students become better writers. From this, it can be concluded that teachers who are not providing enough writing guidance for their students are doing so because they did not have much direction themselves. Thus, many students exit high school without the skills they need for college writing.

Indeed, some teachers feel so unconfident in their teaching of writing that they neglect to change their instruction despite the evidence proving it to be ineffective. One example of this is the preponderance of grammar instruction that abounds in high school classrooms across the country masquerading as writing instruction. In *Writing Next*, the researchers express concern over "some educators' enthusiasm for teaching traditional grammar instruction as a focus for writing instruction for adolescents" (Graham & Perin, 2007b, p. 21), since research shows that this can have a negative impact on writing, as it takes up instructional time and resources (Smith, Cheville, & Hillocks, 2006). Instead, Graham and Perin (2007b) urge educators to make use of contextualized grammatical approaches and sentence combining instruction.

Implications for Practice in College Developmental Writing Classes

Although students' instructional needs are not being met at the secondary level, it is important to figure out how to *address* these requirements at the college level, rather than simply assigning culpability. McCusker (1999) notes the importance of designing and implementing effective developmental writing programs; knowing the needs of the student population, understanding the writing requirements of non-developmental courses, and using effective teaching strategies can all help students increase their writing skills while decreasing their drop-out risk.

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Training is a key ingredient in producing educators who can instruct students to write. For example, in a study of instructors using the process writing approach (one of the eleven identified effective strategies in *Writing Next*), those who had received "explicit" training received far greater effect sizes in student writing outcomes than those who had not undergone training (Graham & Perin, 2007b). Additionally, in a study to examine how professional development could influence student outcomes, researchers concluded that successful pre-service teacher education in writing required modeling and clearly stated learning objectives; students whose teachers participated in this type of professional development showed gains in writing achievement (Fearn & Farnan, 2007).

Determining what constitutes effective writing instruction is a difficult process. Although *Writing Next* outlines eleven effective elements of instruction, Graham and Perin (2007b) state that there is no "optimal mix" (p. 12) that will offer a perfect writing curriculum. Instead, educators must experiment with a variety of strategies and approaches in different combinations to ascertain what works for their particular students. Reviewing research to assess the effectiveness of teaching strategies based on effect size, Graham and Perin (2007a) concluded that grammar instruction was not effective in any treatment, but several other interventions, such as sentence combining, strategy instruction, and inquiry yielded positive effect sizes in different treatments.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development

In *Writing Next*, the element identified as most important on the list is strategy instruction. While there are various approaches, Graham and Perin (2007b) identified Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) as the instructional strategy with the largest effect sizes, based on well-documented research across various SRSD and non-SRSD studies, with particularly great gains for low-achieving writers.

According to Graham, Harris, and Mason (2005), "the primary focus of SRSD is teaching students strategies for successfully completing an academic task" (p.208). However, the researchers point out that SRSD is especially helpful because students are using self-regulatory procedures which will allow them to progress through and better comprehend the learning activity. SRSD is broken into six stages: Develop Background Knowledge, Discuss It, Model It, Memorize It, Support It, and Independent Use (Graham & Perin, 2007b). Instruction is criterion-based, meaning that students must pass through one stage before moving to the next, which can be beneficial to students who

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have struggled with time constraints (Zito, Adkins, Gavins, Harris, & Graham, 2007). Within the six stages, students will receive "explicit teaching" and "individualized instruction" while being treated as "active collaborators in the learning process" (Graham, 2006, p. 204). As part of their self-regulation skills, students may create self-statements to work with "problem definition, planning, self-evaluation, self-reinforcement, and coping" (Reid & Lienemann, 2006, p. 60). Educators employing SRSD instruction may also allow students to employ peer support to understand and use the strategies (Graham, et al, 2005).

In countless studies using SRSD, students have shown gains in their writing, often producing longer, better quality responses that include more of the desired essay elements (Kiuhara, O'Neill, Hawken, & Graham, 2012; Jacobson & Reid, 2010; Reid & Lienemann, 2006; Graham, et al, 2005; Sexton, Harris, & Graham, 1998). SRSD instruction works well with persuasive writing and has several different instructional approaches.

Many SRSD studies have shown positive and significant effect sizes at the elementary and secondary levels, but few studies on writing strategy instruction, in general, have been done in higher education. In a study of developmental writing courses in community colleges, MacArthur and Philippakos (2013) developed a curriculum focusing on teaching five genres of writing, revamping the course from one that had focused mainly on grammar and paragraph writing in the past. All instruction was based around the SRSD model and focused on strategies for planning, drafting, and revising. From pre- to post-intervention, students overwhelmingly increased their writing achievement and reported higher self-efficacy and motivation in writing. In a follow-up round of the study that included classes in two four-year institutions, the researchers added control groups to confirm that SRSD instruction, rather than writing instruction in general, resulted in higher writing achievement. Across classes, based on pre- to post-intervention persuasive writing essays, questionnaires, and interviews, students in the treatment groups scored more highly in writing quality and self-efficacy than those in the control groups (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Ianetta, 2015). This indicates that SRSD instruction can be a successful intervention for developing the skills and confidence levels of developmental writing students.

In an earlier study on SRSD instruction with adult learners in their forties trying to pass a GED exam, MacArthur and Lembo (2008) examined the results of three students who were taught text structure characteristics and writing strategies in conjunction with goal-setting

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and self-evaluation techniques. All students improved the quality of their writing significantly, further showing that adult learners can benefit from SRSD.

Similarly, Bail, Zhang, and Tachiyama (2008) studied the effects of teaching a self-regulation learning course to underprepared college students. As predicted, students in the treatment group significantly improved their long term GPAs in comparison with those in the control groups, demonstrating that self-regulatory practices in general benefit college students.

SRSD, motivation, and self-efficacy

Motivation and self-efficacy are affected by the utilization of SRSD, since "instructional procedures for fostering" these are "embedded within the model" (Graham, et al, 2005, p. 209). Students' beliefs as to what kind of writers they are can influence their writing outcomes. Klassen (2002) explains self-efficacy's impact on writing:

> ...the demands of the task are many—spelling, punctuation, grammar, word choice, and organization—and the need for belief in one's own capabilities to monitor and execute these individual skills—often simultaneously—is correspondingly high. (p. 173-174)

He elaborates by explaining the correlation between students' beliefs about writing and their writing performance. Indeed, SRSD instruction fosters self-efficacy because students' "perceptions of writing competence" (Graham & Harris, 1993, p. 177) increase when they learn how to use the strategies.

As an experiment on how to better engage students in literacy activities and increase motivation, Young, Mathews, Kietzmann, and Westerfield (1997) performed a qualitative study in an alternative high school in Florida serving low-achieving and at-risk students. After setting up and implementing a literacy program that included such elements as direct instruction, conferencing, and group activities, the teachers and researchers observed and interviewed the participating students. Through the program, students largely reported increased motivation and interest; they were able to connect their efforts with their outcomes, and they attributed this to the fact that they had more control over their learning since they were able to set some of their own goals and choose learning activities. Similarly, through SRSD instruction, students set goals, take responsibility for their own learning, and control task management (Harris, Santangelo, & Graham, 2008), all of which can lead to higher motivation and engagement.

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Self-efficacy is very closely related to motivation; if students do not believe that they can complete an activity, they are unlikely to even attempt it (Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007) and are less likely to willingly engage in new writing activities (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). Countless students are plagued with self-doubts about learning in general, communicating with their writing instructor, or controlling the writing process (Holmes, 2001), all of which contribute to their choices as to whether they will participate in literacy activities. However, when students are given explicit strategies to use, and when these strategies are made feasible for them through such SRSD activities as modeling, self-monitoring, self-statements, and coping (Zito, et al, 2007), it is natural that students will be more confident that they are able to complete learning activities.

Pajares and Valiente (2006) researched the relationship between students' feelings of self-efficacy in writing, their motivation to write, and student writing achievement. They explain how students' beliefs in whether or not they *can* write may predict whether or not they *will* write; the higher their self-efficacy in a task, the more effort they will likely exert. The researchers discuss the "self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 159) in which completion of a writing assignment is based on what the students believe they can accomplish, and this is correlated with writing achievement. Through SRSD, when students take responsibility for their own learning by self-monitoring and applying strategies, they are better able to make connections between the level of effort they exert and increased performance; this causes more positive beliefs about themselves as learners and writers (Harris, et al, 2008).

The Importance of Feedback from the Instructor and Peers Providing individualized instruction through the use of written feedback

Due to numerous curricular demands, classroom time for instructors to engage students in authentic and meaningful writing experiences is often diminished, negatively impacting the quality of instruction (Pajares, et al, 2007). However, educators can provide thoughtful and individualized instruction that does not take up valuable classroom time through the use of one-on-one written feedback. By modeling how to elaborate or develop ideas through written comments to the student, an instructor can play an important role in the student's development as a writer, asking for more information and helping focus student thinking on adding specific details (Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988).

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Many educators fail to take full advantage of utilizing written feedback as an instructional tool. Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, and Valdés (2004) conducted a study of the opportunities for student improvement based on the quality of the instructor's feedback on written work, as feedback is considered crucial to students' writing development. In the papers they collected, instructors were quick to edit mechanics, but few made more than superficial comments on content (Patthey-Chavez, et. al, 2004; Beach & Friedrich, 2006). The researchers also examined multiple drafts of the same papers to see if feedback influenced writing outcomes; students who received feedback on content expanded their essays far more than those who received surface-level feedback. Thus, quality written feedback can lead to improvement over time, but poor feedback will likely not advance improvements in student writing.

In order to make maximum instructional use of written comments, educators should ensure that feedback serves the following purposes: to reference rubrics or requirements, to focus on content and organization, and to describe or explain specific points. Beach and Friedrich (2006) argued against instructors making too many comments, marking countless grammatical errors, and making suggestions that were outside a student's zone of proximal development.

Similarly, Wingate (2010) addresses how educator feedback can influence and instruct student writing when students are taught how to use the suggestions. She identifies reasons why students often fail to make use of instructor feedback, such as poor quality or unclear comments. In the study, researchers focused on explaining to the students how utilizing the feedback they received on assignments would help with future writings. Results supported that, when students read the feedback and altered their writing as a result of it, writing scores were higher. Additionally, students who were interviewed reported overwhelmingly that their scores were higher when they focused on improving an area that the instructor had criticized in a previous assignment. Wingate concludes that feedback can lead to higher writing achievement when students are encouraged to understand the benefits of it as an instructional tool.

Written feedback can also help students think more positively about their writing abilities and therefore improve the writing experience. In a study involving the use of dialogue journaling between tutors and students, the students most valued positive comments that gave specific suggestions; these comments were thought to build trust and relationships between the students and tutors (Todd, Mills, Palard, & Khamcharoen, 2001).

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In developmental writing classes, instructors are specifically concerned with framing written feedback in a way that is helpful to students without damaging their often fragile confidence in writing. Zinn (1998) addresses the notion of giving feedback in an informal manner or without grades attached to lessen the intimidation factor and provide more usefulness for apprehensive developmental writers. Self-assessment, peer-assessment, and instructor response are three ways students can receive informal feedback. She additionally stresses that feedback should give the student information that instructs on how to improve rather than just focusing on what was not done well.

In a study to measure effects of feedback in developmental writing classes, Gulley (2012) describes how rough, pre-feedback drafts and revised, post-feedback drafts were rated by evaluators. Across all groups, developmental writing students made significant revisions to their essays and improved the word count after receiving instructor feedback. As written and oral feedback methods were both investigated, the researchers concluded that different students responded better to different methods, and developmental writing instructors should provide a combination of both approaches to maximize revision potential to students in the areas of organization and development.

Dialogic support for argumentative and persuasive writing

Ferretti and Lewis (2012) discuss the importance of oral and written dialogue in support of developing students' argumentative and persuasive writing skills, arguing that students will better understand multiple perspectives if they have the chance to discuss or interact with them in some form. Newell, Beach, Smith, VanDerHeide, Kuhn, and Andriessen (2011) claim that, in order for students to transcend merely summarizing points to try to convince an audience to share their own perspectives, they should engage in discourse with another point of view, as that will mimic an audience more so than merely writing to the instructor. When students have the opportunity to interact socially and argue about a topic, they are able to reframe their preexisting ideas on the perspective.

Instructors can set up situations for dialogic argumentation in several ways. Morgan and Beaumont (2003) conducted an observation in which students experienced dialogic argumentation through face-to-face oral dialogue, online chat sessions, and follow-up oral and written activities. The researchers sought for students to understand the development of argumentation through interaction (including acknowledgement and negotiation) with the other side rather than

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thinking of the differing perspectives as black and white. After having the opportunity to engage with another perspective, the researchers reported that students developed "more substantial, sound points of argument" (Morgan & Beaumont, 2003, p. 154).

Hughes, Kooy, and Kanevsky (1997) discuss the use of dialogic writing within a double-entry journal to promote student learning. The process can begin with the individual (as students take notes and reflect upon assigned readings), move to a small group (where students share and debate, orally and through writing, each other's thoughts on the readings), and progress to the whole class (as groups report out their conclusions). The researchers believe that "true learning" (p. 187) can occur when students are involved in constructing their own knowledge, rather than just attempting to soak up information.

Englert (1992) discusses the merits of dialogic support as a means of scaffolding instruction and expanding on ideas through collaboration and meaningful communication. In a study of writing instruction in special education and general education classrooms, she discovered that alarmingly few writing instructors involved students in collaborative writing activities (including peer review or sharing), emphasized writing for real audiences, or allowed students to have choices in what to write; according to Englert (1992), all of these deficits resulted in students receiving limited opportunities to fully engage in writing activities and learn to develop as writers. To improve students' understanding of the metacognitive process of writing, as well as actual writing performance, Englert emphasizes a sociocultural approach involving collaborative dialogue between the instructor and student, the student and peer, and the student and self (through a "think sheet" or other reflective activity).

Conclusion

Clearly, the writing crisis must be addressed; most students are not proficient writers, and the consequences extend beyond their poor NAEP scores into dire predictions of their future success. When students enter college developmental writing classes, they may have already been jaded by their lack of success in writing in high school. By taking an instructional approach that combines cognitive strategy instruction supported by written and dialogic feedback, instruction that utilizes these elements will, theoretically, improve student performance, as these supports have had positive effects on student writing. Students can benefit from a writing curriculum that lays out a clear plan for writing, encourages the production of texts for different purposes and audiences, and provides a framework for peer, instructor, and self-support.

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