Writing Workshops that Work
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Abstract

Writing workshops are an integral technique in process writing, but their application to ESL college classrooms has received little attention. This paper introduces an adaptation of the writing workshop for ESL in higher education and describes its benefits and limitations. The writing workshop is, in the author's experience, a successful technique for improving second language writing skills.

Introduction

One of the most beloved sounds for a writing teacher is the concentrated silence of a group of students engaged in writing, punctuated by the scratching of pens and pencils, the turning of pages, the whirring of mental cogs. Unfortunately, this scene is most often observed in the timed-writing exams of proficiency tests, and is less common in post-secondary ESL classrooms. It is, however, the hallmark of a writing workshop, a student-centered, process approach to developing writing skills.

Background

Writing workshops (or writer's workshops) developed out of the process approach to writing, a paradigm which became dominant in mainstream elementary education in the 1970s and 1980s, according to its proponents (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988, p. 5). Inspired by the seminal work of Graves, McCormick Calkins, and Atwell (the latter at the middle school level), many teachers around the United States shifted their focus from teaching sub-skills (spelling, punctuation, grammar, topic sentences) in order to attain a writing product, and instead concentrated on developing writers by focusing on the process of writing, and not its form (Calkins, 1986, p. 14). The teacher abandons a "part-to-whole-to-part" method in favor of "whole-to-part-to-whole" (Routman, 2005, p. 15), in which skills are taught in the context of students' writing.

Second language (L2) writing pedagogy (if not necessarily practice) also followed this paradigm shift from product to process (Atikinson, 2003; Silva, 1990). Early approaches to teaching L2 writing had relied on the "current-traditional" rhetoric which advocated the five-paragraph essay. Prompted by research and practice in first language (L1) writing, process writing seemed to take over with a greater emphasis on pre-writing, drafting, and revision, and less on structure, form, accuracy, and mechanics. This was in line with the general climate change in ESL toward communicative language teaching. In the process approach, writing is an act of communication between a writer and a clearly-defined audience, in which meaning is primary. However, in reality, few ESL writing textbooks ever fully embraced this new approach, and instead used oversimplified versions of the process to continue teaching the five-paragraph essay (Caplan, McCullough & Stokes, 2006).

In recent years, the strongest interpretations of the process approach have been called into question in both L1 and L2 writing for failing to teach genre–particularly the genre of the academic expository essay–and for devaluing grammatical accuracy and coherent organization (Atikinson, 2003; Hagemann, 2003; Silva, 1990). In mainstream elementary and secondary education, this reversion to product writing has resulted in part from increased pressure due to high-stakes standardized testing (Routman, 2005). Consequently, Routman has found that writing workshops are unknown in many of the elementary schools in which she is a consultant. However, research shows some support for the notion that good writing practices taught through process techniques can improve students' performance on standardized writing tests (for summaries and anecdotes, see Routman, 2005; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). Furthermore, professional writers speak with rare unanimity on this point: "You learn to write by writing" (Zinsser, 1994, p. 49).

It could be said that process writing was rejected before it was ever fully tested, especially in tertiary-level ESL instruction. Although process writing has been described as "the dominant approach to L2 writing in the last part of the 20th century" (Atkinson, 2003, p. 4), the most developed process writing technique, which answers many of the criticisms of process writing in ESL and has been applied at all levels of L1 teaching, is the writing workshop (Atwell, 1998; Routman, 2005; Shaw, 2001/2002; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). However, writing workshops in the forms described by these authors rarely, if ever, appear in ESL textbooks, journals, or handbooks. A notable exception is a paper by Peyton and her colleagues (1994) on adapting writing workshops for ESL classes at grades K-6. Somehow, writing workshops were left out of the description of process writing in post-secondary ESL.

The history of any writing technique quickly reveals the disparity between the pedagogy of teaching guides and professional journals and what actually occurs on the "front lines." It is quite possible that the writing workshop has already found a place in the ESL classroom, but has yet to reach the literature. This paper, then, reports on an adaptation of the writing workshop technique for high-beginning and low-intermediate level students enrolled in an intensive English program. This contribution describes the benefits one teacher gained from implementing writing workshops, and hopes to encourage other teachers to adapt the activity for their own classrooms.

Implementation

A writing workshop is a class in which students choose what to write about, in what form, and at what length; they also decide when they need feedback and from whom, and when a piece of writing is ready to submit. This is an example of "self-sponsored writing" (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988, p. 71), and it is hoped that students will feel more invested in their projects than in some formal assignments or writing exercises. Although at the younger grades some teachers use the workshop model exclusively, it is by no means necessary to do this, and the writing workshop can be successful as part of an ESL course which includes formal writing, grammar instruction, reading, and content.

It is essential to carve out a regular period of time for the workshop (Calkins, 1986, p. 25; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 8). Although every book on workshops suggests an optimal amount of workshop time, in reality it will depend on the exigencies of the curriculum and institution. The present author dedicates one hour per week of his IEP reading/writing class, which meets for two hours, four days a week. However much time is available, it is advisable to be consistent so that students know that, for instance, the last hour on Friday is always the writing workshop.

The writing workshop described here is not as radical as the title of Elbow's book, *Writing Without Teachers* (1998), but Elbow's work does inform the first part of the workshop. Each session begins with freewriting, which is described best by the writer who popularized this writing-to-learn technique:

> The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you're doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put something down. […] The only requirement is that you *never* stop. (Elbow, 1998, p. 1)

To adapt this to ESL, students can be told that it is acceptable to write the occasional word in their L1, but the freewriting should predominantly be in English. Freewriting is a mainstay of most process-writing teachers, and has been adopted in some areas of ESL. However, freewriting need not simply be a formulaic pre-writing activity (as in many textbooks, e.g. Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Freewriting is thinking on paper, and it develops fluency while encouraging L2 writers to focus on content above organization and language. Writing workshops can begin with five to ten minutes' freewriting, which can help generate ideas for the workshop, or simply establish the expectation to put words down on paper.

Following the freewriting, most experts advocate delivering a "mini-lesson" (Calkins, 1986). A minilesson is "intentional, explicit teaching" (Routman, 2005, p. 154), but it should not be decontextualized. The best minilessons arise out of the teacher's observation of students' writing needs, or introduce a strategy, tip, or genre for which the teacher believes the students are ready. Routman recommends that teachers ask themselves, "Is this the most important thing students need at this time to continue writing well?" (p. 154). There are several resources for minilessons which can be taught in writing workshops (e.g. Atwell, 1998, p. 148-216; Calkins, 1986, p. 170-193; Routman, 2005, p. 155). Some examples include topic choice, writing genres, writing and punctuating dialogue, writing leads (interesting introductions), revision strategies, balancing ideas and details, controlling generalizations, improving cohesion, and dictionary use. In a one-hour class, a minilesson will typically take 5-10 minutes (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 11), although with low-level ESL learners, it can take longer to explain even basic writing concepts. Teachers should not be afraid to deliver a short lecture at this stage (with the emphasis on "short"); there is ample time in the rest of the workshop for students to interact with each other and with the teacher. The best writing classroom is one in which there is "high student *and* high teacher input" (Calkins,

1986, p. 165). The use of the minilesson to provide proactive or reactive instruction answers many of the criticisms of process writing as unfocused and unproductive (see, e.g., Atkinson, 2003).

The majority of the workshop should be devoted to writing. During this time, students can start a new piece, continue an existing one, revise or edit a piece of writing, discuss their writing with a partner, or conference with the teacher. Sometimes it is appropriate to direct students to use the technique from the minilesson, but generally students should be given the freedom to choose their own assignments. This is particularly important with lower-level post-secondary ESL students, who may feel patronized by some textbooks and their childish assignments, or frustrated at their limited linguistic resources in the second language. In this segment of the workshop, students are kept on-task, whether they are writing, revising, or editing. In addition, conversation should be encouraged. When L2 writers are blocked, talking with a partner or the teacher can unleash ideas and expressions and thereby promote written fluency. The present author has even played classical music quietly in the background to show that writing does not need to take place in absolute silence. It is highly advisable for the teacher to write with the students, at least in the early workshops, to set the tone and model the writing process (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 26).

Peer review is an important part of the writing workshop, and it can take place in pairs, groups of three, or larger groups. Elbow recommends that "everyone reads everyone else's writing" (Elbow, 1998, p. 77), but this might not be practical or desirable in an ESL class, especially with lower-level learners. All students, however, can be given the freedom to choose their own peer review partners as and when they think they need the feedback. It is important to teach students how to peer review, and how to ask each other good questions, either as a minilesson or as part of the writing curriculum. It might also help to provide peer review forms with sample questions, such as: What works? What doesn't work? Ask the author three questions about the piece. How can the writer improve the organization of the writing? Are there any unclear sentences? In very advanced L1 workshops, student writing becomes the primary text for the entire class (Shaw, 2001/2002). The application of this to college-level ESL remains to be explored.

During the writing time, the teacher can conference with some of the students. A teacher conference need not be long, however. Much can be accomplished in a few short minutes when the student has a focused question, or when the teacher concentrates on helping with just one aspect of the writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998, p. 52). In some cases, students will ask the teacher for help; in other cases, the teacher can circulate and help students who appear to be stuck: the choice depends to a great extent on the class dynamic. Some studies in L1 writing have suggested that a 2-3 minute individual conference held every 2-3 weeks can be beneficial (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988, p. 25). In programs where it is not feasible to hold lengthy conferences on a regular basis, the writing workshop conference provides an opportunity to give personalized feedback efficiently while the other students are engaged in another activity (writing, revising, or peer reviewing; see Calkins, 1986, p. 26).

Most workshops for younger learners end with a "sharing" (Calkins, 1986), "group meeting" (Atwell, 1998) or "celebration" (Routman, 2005) period, in which students read aloud, display, or otherwise present their work. This is an element which might be less useful in an ESL classroom, since reading aloud can be laborious with low-level L2 learners. It is, however, a way to integrate more listening and speaking into the reading/writing class. Another form of sharing is to publish student writing, which can be as simple as making a photocopy or overhead transparency of a piece of writing, or more complex, such as a bulletin board display, a class book, or an online publication. If this seems inappropriate for the age or level of the students, this stage may be omitted in its entirety. An alternative is to have students reflect on their progress in the day's workshop by filling out a response form with questions such as: What did you do in today's workshop? What will you do to prepare for the next workshop? What questions do you have about your writing?

Atwell (1998) adds a useful step to her workshops to ensure student accountability. After the mini-lesson, she takes the "state of the class" (p. 107) by asking each student to say in a few words what they are going to work on today (for example, "start a new science fiction story," or "revise my letter to my grandmother"). The teacher writes these notes in a log, and can then ensure that students are making sufficient effort, for instance, by talking to students who have spent an inordinately long time on a particular piece (p. 108-109).

Assessment

Writing workshops lend themselves to portfolio assessment. Students choose their best pieces of writing at the end of a session and submit final, edited copies along with all the previous drafts. In addition, students write a self-evaluation of their portfolio, or a "cover letter," either for each individual piece, or for the whole portfolio (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995, p. 16-17). A cover letter is similar to the letter an author would send with a manuscript to a publisher, magazine, or journal. In it, the student introduces the writing, explains what they tried to achieve in the piece, and possibly describes the strengths and weaknesses of the writing. A self-evaluation should tell the teacher what the student learned from compiling the portfolio, what they still need to learn as a writer, and what the strengths and weaknesses of the portfolio are. The teacher can then evaluate the portfolio holistically, with a rubric, or against a set of writing objectives.

The use of portfolio evaluation allows the teacher to avoid giving grades to writing workshop pieces throughout the session. Grades can "terminate students' engagement with the work and cut off the possibility of revision" (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988, p. 28). A low grade can also discourage students by implying that there is no hope of them passing the course. A further advantage to the delay in grading is that the portfolio grade reflects the student's progress over the course, so that the grade indicates the level that the student has reached. It is, of course, important to give constructive and formative feedback throughout, and to help students understand when a piece should be considered finished, even if it is not perfect.

An adaptation of Calkins' (1986) method allows for a smooth feedback system in the university ESL classroom. All students have a writing workshop folder, in which they are instructed to keep all their workshop writing (freewriting, notes, and all drafts). When they have a piece that is finished or on which they would like the teacher's input, they put the paper in the teacher's folder. The teacher reads and comments on the papers in the folder and returns them at the next workshop.

Finally, it is important to see all writing as work-in-progress; even if a particular piece is finished, the student's development as a writer is unlikely to be over. As the American novelist William Faulkner said, "If you want to write something really good, you must risk writing a great deal that is really bad" (as cited in Calkins, 1986, p. 179). This should be encouraging to students who still aspire to writing something "really good."

Benefits of the Writing Workshop

I began to research and teach the writing workshop when I was faced with an intermediate-level writing class with a wide range of writing ability and goals. Unlike more advanced classes, where the goal is more clearly defined by academic readiness, at the lower levels, writing classes need to develop students' skills, confidence, fluency, and accuracy, but need not focus on the expository essay. Avoiding the bland, formulaic writing that is often promoted by ESL writing textbooks (for a review, see Caplan et al., 2006), writing workshops generate a greater amount of writing, encourage extensive and repeated revision, allow individual feedback and coaching, and permit students to work toward their own objectives at their own level.

Furthermore, contrary to criticisms of process writing, the writing workshop can be claimed to improve students' language skills because it is compatible with a "focus on form" methodology (Doughty & Williams, 1998). In the form-focused classroom, students' attention is drawn to form (vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, spelling or any linguistic system) within a meaning-driven, communicative activity. In the writing workshop, the teacher "emphasize[s] the writing process with tasks that encourage genuine communication but strategically interrupt[s] that process to call attention to forms student writers might find useful" (Hagemann, 2003, p. 74). This is the "whole-part-whole" approach (Routman, 2005), which has always been present in process pedagogy despite misinterpretations which claimed that grammar teaching is inimical to the writing workshop (see Calkins, 1986, p. 200 for a rebuttal).

In the writing workshop, the primary text is the students' own writing, and through carefully chosen interventions in minilessons, conferences, and written feedback, the teacher can draw students' attention to content, organization and language problems in their writing (reactive feedback) at the point of need, or introduce new structures, techniques, and strategies which they can immediately implement (preemptive feedback). Hagemann (2003) presents a convincing case for applying the focus-on-form steps of noticing, hypothesis development, and hypothesis testing to the writing workshop. When

student writers are invested in their texts, the new language and writing skills become essential to their task, and the focus on form may be most effective.

Student investment, however, is difficult to measure. Improved attitude and motivation have been found, along with reduced anxiety, in younger ESL writers (Peyton et al., 1994, p. 482). The mainstream literature is replete with anecdotes about children who grow in confidence and ability by identifying themselves as writers (e.g., Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Routman, 2005). At the college level, Shaw (2001/2002) reports on the increased interest in writing she observed at a Yale writer's workshop for undergraduates. There was also "critical improvement in both writing style and command of the content," and alumni of the course told her that the skills they learned had transferred to their other classes (Shaw, 2001/2002, p. 324). The evidence may be anecdotal, but together it makes a persuasive argument for experimenting with this technique.

There are also practical benefits to the writing workshop for the teacher. Once the workshop structure is established, the class requires little preparation, and the grading is manageable because students rarely all turn work in at the same time until the final portfolio is due. In the meantime, students are producing a lot of writing and spending valuable time on revision. Peter Elbow, one of the earliest proponents of process writing at the college level reduced the task of composition courses to this principle: "The main thing we need is tons and tons and tons of writing" (Words Work Network, 2002).

Limitations

If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard. It's one of the hardest things people do. (Zinsser, 1994, p. 12)

There is no magic bullet to shatter the problem of teaching writing, let alone L2 writing. Writing is hard, and so is teaching writing. The writing workshop can be a powerful tool in post-secondary ESL, but it will not work in all classes. The time requirement is a major obstacle in some programs, especially where classes are expected to cover multiple skills or a specific curriculum. However, the breadth of descriptive studies of writing workshops from kindergarten to graduate school suggests that teachers at all levels find this technique beneficial. It is even possible that writing workshops would be a good preparation for students preparing for academic degrees since some universities are using workshops in their composition courses.

In academic-preparation courses, teachers might be concerned that students will not engage in academic writing in the workshop. Although it is true that students need practice in many different genres, and that they may encounter a range of writing beyond the expository essay in their university classes, academic discourse has to be learned and practiced. A possible solution would be to limit students' choice of genres (if not topics) to analytical assignments, or place stipulations on the types of writing that may be included in the portfolio.

A more serious objection is that despite all the structure, monitoring, and accountability, some students still manage to do little constructive work in the hour. This is not to say that those same students would be any more productive in an hour of exercises in a traditional writing textbook, but it is nonetheless a concern. If this occurs, it is appropriate to conference with less motivated students, or spend time circulating and ensuring that students are on-task. It is also useful to give a minilesson on the purpose of the writing workshop. One way to add variety to a flagging workshop is to introduce model writing, either a student's, the instructor's, or a good (short) literary text (Calkins, 1986).

Student Responses

Students' responses to the ESL writing workshop in my high-beginning and intermediate classes have been overwhelmingly positive. Their self-evaluations reveal a common theme of self-confidence in students who either had not written much in English before, or who simply did not like writing. In the words of one Korean student, who admitted he was terrified at first of the demands of the writing workshop, "I know that if I write positively, obviously, it will help me because writing will strengthen enthusiasm as a writer."[1] Several students commented, "I felt I am a writer," which is important because if students see themselves as writers, and not simply students who are forced to write, they will approach their assignments with a more positive attitude, and this will benefit them. Interestingly, Routman (2005) reported the same response from L1 elementary school children.

The freedom to choose their own topics was closely associated with this increase of self-confidence in many of the self-evaluations. The students appreciated the ability to "write what do they want to write about," and they felt that they wrote better when they chose their own subjects. A related benefit for students was that it gave them greater autonomy in the classroom, as this low-intermediate Japanese writer explains: "[At] first, I have problem about 'TOPIC' in writing workshop because my teacher always chooses the topic for me before … After 10 weeks, I can choose the topic easy now since I can choose any topic if I want and do my best for describe the topic."

By far the most popular part of the workshop, and the one which often helped students find topics, increase their fluency, and gain in confidence, was freewriting. Even when I use freewriting out of the context of the writing workshop, I can be guaranteed a number of grateful remarks about this technique on my class evaluations. The following response from a very quiet, intermediate-level Korean woman is representative:

> During four months, I have written free writing. I remember still now when I wrote first free writing. That time, I spend much time for freewriting. I wrote just four lines and I didn't have enough stories that I can write, so I didn't like free writing, but more and more, spending times were decrease, I became writing half a page during ten minutes. Now, I really enjoy free writing. … Teacher didn't read my [free writing] paper, so I can try to writing many different styles. Above all, I could forget fear about English writing. … I always thought about that my

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[1] All students' comments are excerpted verbatim and with their written permission.

> grammar was right or false, but now, during free writing, I don't care about that. I just write about I want to write.

I have observed the same dramatic increase in the quantity of students' freewriting at all ability levels. This student also reminds us that the "fear of writing" is a real and paralyzing phobia, and that Elbow's (1998) theories do work in practice.

Feedback also featured predominantly in students' praise for the workshop. Even though the teacher's grading load should, in fact, be lower with the writing workshop than more traditional assignments, students found that the teacher's interventions were timely and useful. Many students astutely connected this with the number of times they chose to revise their papers. For example, this Japanese high-beginner told me, "I wrote some paragraphs, and I revised that. I ran over [went over] my paragraphs. I think it is important for my writing improve. When I improve my paragraphs, teacher's advices is important and help me." The workshop encourages this successful combination of multiple revisions and appropriate feedback.

Many students commented on their progress in grammar and mechanics as well. Although both were covered extensively in other parts of the course, I followed the process writing doctrine of responding first to content, and only later to grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. However, in minilessons and conferences, students did receive help with editing skills and understanding the types of mistakes they were making. Interestingly, although accuracy was not the objective of the writing workshop, it was an outcome, at least in the students' minds. Their drafts confirm that as the clarity of the content developed, the language use improved. This implicit, form-focused approach to error correction paid off for one Brazilian low-intermediate student: "The writing workshop was very important to me because it made possible I saw my mistakes and fixes them." The whole-part-whole approach clearly can be successful in college-level ESL.

Conclusion

Overall, the writing workshop fulfills its goals of creating a supportive climate in which all students can practice and improve all aspects of their writing at their own pace and level. It creates a "community of writers" (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988), or in the words of my student: "The writing workshop was really good time. During this time, I could talk to my class mates and receive good advice and write essay freely. … It made my spirit freely and gave me confidence about writing."

Author Note

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