USING WRITING PORTFOLIOS AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING AS METHODS OF ASSESSING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS

Linda Tuggles Coats
Mississippi State University

Abstract

A number of students enrolled in English Composition are not acquiring the needed writing skills to advance in school or in the business world. Many of these students possess a nonchalant attitude about writing and its importance. What can writing teachers do to ensure these students know how to write correctly? This study describes the benefits of using writing port- folios and cooperative learning to improve writing skills. The findings revealed that writing portfolios and cooperative learning are effective means for teaching writing. Students demonstrated more confidence in writing and decreased their apprehensiveness toward writing. Also, students developed evaluation skills.

Television dominates the minds of American youth; they spend very little time reading, writing, and utilizing their thinking faculties outside of school. When students graduate from high school and enter college or the work force, it is assumed that they possess basic writing skills. Many students are literally unequipped to pursue a college career or a job that requires the least bit of writing (Brand, 1992). Who should be held accountable? Is it the parents, educators, teachers, or students? Regardless of who is to blame, teachers of writing must combat this problem and produce students who can write critically and correctly.

Students' underdeveloped writing skills are of major concern to educators. Teachers are becoming more creative in the classroom in finding ways to encourage students to want to write and to do their best when they write. Two innovative and effective methods for restructuring traditional composition courses are the inclusion of writing portfolios and cooperative learning as major methods of learning and assessing students' writing skills.

When measuring the quality of students' writing, many composition courses are de- signed to grade a draft only one time. Students' writing quality should be measured by before and after samples (Hyslop, 1990). Although the five-paragraph format essay (introduction, three

body paragraphs, and conclusion) is popular and useful for teaching inexperienced writers, it can conceptually handicap students. Many student writers view the five-paragraph plan as the only way to structure an essay, but it should be viewed as a means of learning the principles of effective writing that can be applied to any writing situation (Nunnally, 1991).

Because students do not realize the purpose of the five-paragraph plan and because this is the only method of writing taught in most composition classes, students are unable to pro- duce effectively other types of writing when they enter the work force. To be productive members of the work force, students must be able to use language effectively in a variety of situations (Pope, 1993).

It is necessary that educators move toward student-centered and student-sensitive class-room structures which emphasize the teaching and learning process (Purves, Rogers, & Soter, 1990; Tchudi & Mitchell, 1989). Pope (1993) believed the work environment will not require workers to recite dramatic monologues, delineate the parts of the paragraph, recite grammar rules, or write a five-paragraph essay; instead, workers will be required to possess the abilities to use information, write clearly, find ways of interacting with others by defining and exploring issues of common interest, and to identify problems from unique perspectives. Barker (1992) asserts the work force is calling for persons who can perfect the changes others have implemented. Barker labels these persons as "paradigm pioneers" or "paradigm shifters" (p. 71). These persons are needed to serve as change agents for English composition classes.

Writing Portfolios

Using writing portfolios and cooperative learning in composition classes would better prepare students for future writing situations (Cintorino, 1993; Colby, 1986; Krest, 1990; Pope, 1993). Cooper and Brown (1992) and Zinn (1998) postulated that compiling a portfolio can be very powerful because it enables students to see themselves as writers, especially when it involves opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection. In Cooper and Brown's study, external criteria were established by identifying the kinds of writings the students have to include and then allowing them to select specific writing assignments from a list. The option to select writing activities from a required list allows students many opportunities to reflect on their writing and their abilities as writers. Cooper and Brown found that each port- folio item must relate to teaching implications. They included opportunities for students to learn from their writing, to discuss their ideas with other students, and allowed students to synthesize in writing their thoughts after the discussion.

Ballard (1992) experimented with portfolios as the final examination. She was amazed that students were able to use the vocabulary of composition and that they were honest in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Ballard found the students did not simply mimic her comments, but discussed technical problems and personal insights they learned from their own writings. Herter (1991) used portfolios to assess student writers' growth over time. Portfolios gave Herter's students the opportunity to generate topics and issues important to them. Portfolios also made students accountable for choosing those writings which best dis- played their literary competence. Wolf (1989) pointed out that students need time to study their works and to select the pieces that best exemplify what they have learned; thus the writing portfolio represents what learning has taken place during the duration of the class. Murphy (1998) claims that the time

students spend selecting writings to be included in portfolios leads to reflection, a necessary part of portfolios. Further, portfolios give a more accurate representation of the writing accomplishments or shortcomings of a student and a teacher

Cooperative Learning

In assessing the preference and usefulness of cooperative learning techniques in the classroom, Hoffman (1992) found that students preferred to work in selected small groups. In a similar study, Liftig (1990) found that students were positive and supportive in their comments regarding other students' writings. Students felt the comments from their peers that validated their artistic purposes were the most satisfying and helpful. Cooperative learning provided students with a different and important aspect in evaluating their writing, and measured the writers' success in reaching the audience. This study also indicated that though students want some critical comments, they are often in disagreement with the evaluator's comments.

Many teachers do not allow students to respond to or evaluate other students' writing because students do not respond effectively to the writings of others students. Neubert and McNelis (1990) conducted a study designed to teach students to give focused and specific responses to their peers' writings. They developed the Praise, Question, Polish (PQP) technique that requires group members to take turns reading their papers aloud as other group members follow along with copies. First, the responders are asked to react to the piece of writing by first identifying what they like about the work (Praise), then identifying what portion of the writing they did not understand (Question), and finally offering specific suggestions for improvement of the writing (Polish). Ballard (1992) concluded that students were able to improve their own writings from critically evaluating the writing of their peers.

From these researchers' insight, writing portfolios and cooperative learning have proven to be worthy of classroom exploration. These methods allow students to reflect on their writing and the writing process. Additionally, students are able to develop a critical perspective of their writings and the writings of others.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of using writing portfolios and cooperative learning as methods of assessing writing. The following specific research ques- tions were addressed:

1. What are the identifiable advantages of using writing portfolios and cooperative learning for assessing writing?
2. How can students become motivated to write?

Method

Participants

Students enrolled in one section of English Composition I at a college in the north central part of Mississippi were the participants in this study. The grade level of these students ranged from first semester freshmen to first semester sophomore. A total of 12 students participated in this study. There were nine African American students (two females and seven males) and three international males (Bahamians and Jamaicans). Of these students, two were first semester freshmen, six were second semester freshmen, and four were first semester sophomores.

Procedures

At the beginning of the semester the students participating this study were asked to complete a Student Information Card. This card asked for student information along with the desired grade, the students perceived writing weaknesses, and what aspect of their writing they wanted to improve. It also provided space for the summary of the initial writing conference with the instructor and the students' final grade from the course.

The students were given regular course lectures and instructions on the format and characteristics of an essay. The portfolio and cooperative learning concepts were explained. The students began writing essays twice a week. Conferences were held with each student after each writing activity to identify strengths and weaknesses of each particular piece of writing. Each student completed 25 writing assignments (includes daily writing drills) during the study. At the end of the period, the students were asked to select writings to be included in their portfolios (See Figure 1).

Writing Portfolio
Table of Contents

Introduction
Includes student background, career aspirations, basis of writings, and new information gained from the course.

Discovery Writings
Includes in class writing for a specific period of time on subjects that could b possible essay topics. Examples of topic choices: the most dangerous thin has ever happened to me, the different types of friends, three things I would change about my college, etc.

Essays (using the patterns of development)
Includes patterns of development such as narration, process analysis, division, classification, illustration, comparison-contrast, definition, argumentation, etc.

Writing to Explore
Includes thematic writing from readings, on violence, the struggle for identity, we are what we do, etc.

Writing in the Work Place
Includes career and goal statements, letters of application, and resume

Blind Peer Evaluation
Includes the student's evaluation of a Xeroxed version of a class member's papers with the name removed.

Specific Peer Evaluation
Includes the student's completed Peer Evaluation Form of another student paper after discussing his/her comments with that student.

Figure 1: Information in Writing Portfolio

The Writing Portfolio

Students were required to include different types of writings in their portfolios. The first section of the portfolio was to include introductory information about students, the students' career aspirations, and a description of the knowledge gained from taking the composition course. In the second section, students were required to include discovery writings, essays using the patterns of development, exploratory writings, work place writings, blind peer evaluations result, specific peer evaluations results, and justification for selecting the specific entries included in the portfolio. Each type of writing is explained in the following paragraphs.

Discovery Writings

As a means of getting students accustomed to writing regularly, the first 10 or 15 minutes of each class were spent writing on selected topics. The instructor read a list of topic ideas and the students were asked to select one and write for the specified period of time. The students were informed that neatness and correctness were not important; the main purpose of the activity

was for the students to put ideas on paper that they might be able to use at later dates. The students were asked to include two of these assignments in their writing portfolios. This class met three times a week for a fifty-minute period.

Essays

A goal of the writing program at this college is to have students master the art of writ- ing effective essays using the patterns of development. Students are introduced to such pat- terns as narration, illustration, comparison-contrast, division-classification, and other related patterns. At the end of the course students should be able to write well-organized, unified, and well-developed essays that are free of major grammatical errors. The students were asked to select two essays from this group to be included in the writing portfolio. Addition- ally, they had to show evidence of pre-writing, thesis development, support exploration, and thoughtful evaluation. They had to include their first drafts. In selecting these two essays, students were asked to select essays with different purposes. Their selection of essays with different patterns of development gave an indication of their ability to apply the structural knowledge of developing an essay to different types of essays. Since the goal of the course is for students to write effective essays, the instructor wanted to be sure that the students mastered this process.

Writing to Explore

In addition to the required writings, students were provided opportunities to explore their thoughts and their past. This activity involved writing from reading. Students read se- lections relating to multicultural experiences, and then were asked to structure an essay using topic ideas inspired from the selection. For example, students read the selection "Cultural Journey to Africa," by Christopher Reynolds in which he (a white man) describes his visit to the Ivory Coast for the celebration of 'Culturefest 1992'. After reading the selection, the students were given 45 minutes to write an essay detailing what they knew of their ancestral heritage, what they wanted to know about their ancestral heritage, and how their heritage affects who and what they are. Students were to include two of these writings in their writing portfolios.

After a few complaints ("I don't know anything."), the students began to write what they knew and found out that they knew more than they thought. Their timed writing reflected thought, efforts to organize ideas chronologically, and careless grammatical errors.

Wiring in the Work Place

The future for most college students includes the world of work and/or the world of advanced education. Teachers of writing must bring these worlds into the classrooms in order to enable students to build bridges between school and the world outside it (Cintorino, 1993). This section of the writing portfolio was designed to give students the chance to prepare writings to aid them in their future endeavors. Students wrote personal career statements, letters of

application, and resumes. Two of these work place writings were included in their writing portfolios.

Blind Peer Evaluation

To give the students experience in evaluating essays as honestly as possible, blind peer evaluations (nameless essays) were used. Students were given typewritten and Xeroxed handwritten essays and asked to critique them. With this type of evaluation students were asked to identify grammatical errors and to answer three questions: (a) What was good about the paper? (b) What did you not understand about the paper? and (c) What specific suggestions can you offer for improvements? One blind peer evaluation was to be included in their writing portfolios.

Specific Peer Evaluation

In addition to the blind peer evaluations, students were required to complete specific peer evaluations. With this assignment students were required to complete a Peer Evaluation form for each paper evaluated. The student evaluator had to discuss his or her suggestions with the author of the paper. This form provided the students with a guide for identifying possible errors. One of these evaluations was to be included in their writing portfolios.

Rational for all Selections

Finally, students were asked to include a section in their writing portfolios that discussed their rationale for selecting each entry included in their portfolios. These rationale serve as a means for helping the researcher identify what the students perceived to be their writing strengths and weaknesses.

Results

In assessing the discovery writings included in students portfolios, students indicated that they selected writings they felt good about. Eighty-three percent (n = 12) of the writings were more than a half page, and almost 50% were free of grammatical errors. Although students were asked to include the original versions, many were reluctant to include any selection that was not neat.

Students were asked to include two essay writings. The most popular patterns selected for inclusion in the portfolios were narration (67%) and illustration (50%). Students first drafts included errors such as spelling, pronoun-antecedent agreement, subject-verb agree- ment, reference, comma-splice, fragments, paragraph identification. Many of these errors were corrected in the revised version. The major error with illustration papers was the lack of specific and sufficient support with the first draft as well as with the revised version.

The exploratory writings were very interesting in that students provided insight on a subject that they had thought very little about in the past. Sixty-seven percent of the students made historical reference to slavery. Again order was a noted plus to all papers. Since this was a timed writing, students completed the assignment hurriedly; yet, the instructor was impressed with the amount of details that students expounded on during the brief period. No paper was error free; grammatical errors were identified in major quantities.

Assignments relating to writing in the work place sparked the most interest and were difficult for the students to write correctly. All of the participants (n = 12) selected the, career statement and the resume' as entries to be included in their portfolios. The career statement required the students to focus on their future and to justify their choice of including these entries their writing portfolio. A review of these writings, revealed that students were able to utilize the five-paragraph format to develop their statements. Examples of the thesis statements developed by the students are:

I was determined I wanted to be a teacher.

With this major I would like to help others that needs my help; but to accomplish this I must reach the requirements of my major first.

The major structural error was support. The major error with the resumes was parallelism.

When evaluating the blind peer evaluation assignment, it was found that students were able to identify errors such as misspellings, using the wrong word, punctuation, wordiness, and sentence structure. Comments to the aforementioned questions (What was good about the paper? What did you not understand? And What specific suggestions can you offer for improvements?) included:

Everything is good about the paper and it's hitting most issues on the head, cost of school, living environment.

I liked the way the writer went into detail with his/her essay. He/she was very specific.

I liked the way they expressed their feelings about drunk drivers.

I understood everything the writer reported.

All of the problems I can relate to so I understand everything.

Some of the words and phrases need to be more vivid . . .

You should not capitalize everything and you must certainly watch where you put your punctuation.

The specific peer evaluations required students to complete the Peer Evaluation form. In most cases, student evaluators were able to identify thesis statements, topic sentences, and what part of the paper needed clarification. It was difficult however, for them to identify major

strengths and weaknesses. Responses to the question, What is the paper's major strengths? included:

> . . . is showing the time of the situation as they happen in a timely event.

> How he mad [made] the story feel

> The authors major strengths are that his paper is well organized and has good struc- ture. It is in detail.

> Structure the importance of knowing your background.

> good strong details

> the neatness in his hand writing and the way he spaced it

Some of the responses to the question, What is the paper's major weaknesses? were:

> his punctuation

> order

> The introduction was a little short, but everything else is O.K.

> his grammar usage and spelling of words

When the evaluator was asked to write additional supportive comments, students wrote:

> You can eliminate some of the "and's" and use a semi colon.

> The author has a very good idea in terms of his organization and his details of his paragraphs on writing an essay. The author should write more.

> I like strong details–keep you awake. I like the strong thesis statement at the beginning.

During the discussion portion of this assignment, many of the authors disagreed with the evaluator most of the time. Although many of the pairs of students simply read from the form, a few engaged in intellectual exchange about their papers. It was also noted that the students made reference to the paper when citing errors. One of the evaluators sought sup- port from the textbook for the errors that he had identified. The students actually appeared to know what they were talking about.

Discussion

There are a number of identifiable advantages in using writing portfolios and cooperative learning in English composition classes. First, students are given the opportunity to write more and to rewrite or revise what they have written. Refocusing is important because as time elapses between drafts, students distance themselves from their writings and are able to resee what they have written allowing for objective revision (Nadell, McMeniman, & Langan, 1994). Second, students can prepare different types of writings that can benefit them in the future as college students or as members of the workforce. Because different types of writing are included, students are required to "think" and to "reflect" about what they write. They are required to formulate opinions and to provide specific support for those opinions. Peer criticism in the classroom acquaints students with the points of view of others. It requires that the students seek and accept help, reinforcing the team concept that is prevalent in the work environment. Additionally, peer criticism aids students in sharpening their knowledge about essay structure and grammatical rules. In order to evaluate effectively someone else's paper, students must know what to look for and be able to justify their comments. There are also recognizable disadvantages with the use of writing portfolios; the added paper load for writing teachers is almost unmanageable.

Finally, students can become motivated to write by writing on subjects that are of interest to them. Portfolios provide for this variety and give the students a sense of ownership. Students spend the majority of class time writing, thus becoming accustomed to the process.

The researcher recognizes there are limitations to this study. First, a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis could have been more I persuasive in targeting the added growth of students' writing competencies. Second, a longitudinal study for the stu- dents' entire college experience, typically two years, could have also been more effective. Nevertheless, the findings and the efforts of this study are worthy because educators must experiment with different methods and techniques if students' underdeveloped writing skills are to be improved and if colleges are to produce citizens of the twenty-first century who can communicate effectively.

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