DOI: 10.37514/WAC-J.2002.13.1.08 The WAC Journal, Vol. 13: June 2002

Scaffolding Writing Skills for ESL Students in an Education Class at a Community College

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Introduction

During the spring 2000 semester, the writers of this article, an Education Program faculty member and a CUNY Writing Fellow at Bronx Community College (BCC), collaborated on converting a core Education course into one of the College's newly designated writing intensive courses. We planned to integrate familiar WAC approaches, such as learning logs and reflective journals, into the course's traditional high stakes writing assignments, which included a formal lesson plan, a summary of a journal article, and a research paper. Along with improving writing skills, we hoped that the aspiring teachers enrolled in the course would use writing-to-learn exercises to become more reflective about their own learning processes as well as to master the course material.

Our experience was notably successful by several measures: grades were significantly higher and writing in formal writing situations improved greatly. Student evaluations affirmed that students found the additional writing assignments helpful both for enhancing writing skills and understanding the content of the course. In this article we want to share our findings and examine what we think made this initiative effective. Chief among them:

- *Scaffolding assignments, including low stakes writing, that supported students in preparing formal high stakes assignments, improved outcomes dramatically.*
- *Low stakes writing assignments were particularly helpful for teachers of non-native speakers of English.* Fully 98% of students enrolled in

the class were ESL students. Several times during the semester a low stakes writing assignment revealed that students seriously misunderstood key words and concepts. Once the language issues were clarified, which sometimes involved simply defining a single word, students were able to successfully complete the assignment.

• *The correlation between the disciplinary context and WAC activities advanced student learning.* The course focused on methods of teaching reading to elementary school students. Just as children learn to read through a dynamic and developmental process, writers gain skills from opportunities to experiment and practice. Students viewed class writing activities as paralleling the reading process they were studying. In this class writing was not the "sudden death" experience associated with traditional academic assignments like a midterm exam or a term paper. As one student remarked in her evaluation, "I learned that people learn to write by writing. Writing is not such a frightening experience to me."

Background and Context

BCC's WAC Program is part of the City University of New York's (CUNY) WAC Initiative, which aims to improve student writing by encouraging faculty from all disciplines to incorporate more writing assignments into the classroom. All 26 CUNY campuses are involved in the Initiative, and university administrators have allocated significant resources to the effort: faculty development seminars were funded on each campus, and writing fellows, doctoral students from the City University Graduate Center, were assigned to work directly with faculty in developing discipline-related writing assignments.

BCC's WAC Plan focuses on developing writing intensive courses in the disciplines. Writing intensive courses are disciplinary courses that require students to complete several "high stakes" writing assignments as a major component of their grade; it is planned that eventually all BCC students would be required to enroll in at least two writing intensive courses prior to graduation. In spring 2000 we focused on converting Education 16 (Methods of Teaching Reading) into a writing intensive course.

Education 16 (ED 16) is at the center of the Education curriculum, which is a five-course sequence that prepares students to work as paraprofessionals in the public school system or to transfer to a four-year baccalaureate program in the field. It focuses on teaching reading in the primary school grades and requires that students complete discipline-spe-

cific assignments, such as a formal lesson plan, and demonstrate facility in interpreting disciplinary discourse by preparing a summary of a professional journal article. Students enrolled are often involved in some form of experiential learning, such as field placements and internships, in which they work directly with elementary school children. Many are also parenting a child who is learning to read and bring their personal experiences to classroom discussions.

BCC's Education Program attracts many adult students, especially women with children who are returning to school primarily to prepare for the workforce. In spring 2000, ED 16's enrollment was 26 students. Twenty-four spoke Spanish rather than English as a first language, but students' relative fluency with English varied radically: some students had attended high school in New York City and had at least four years of exposure to written and oral English; others were recent immigrants to the United States, with limited vocabulary and facility with the language. Highly motivated students, they brought passion and energy to the classroom—participating eagerly in discussions, engaging with avid interest in class group work, and bringing personal impressions to classroom discussions. Education Program faculty members often expressed frustration with the great disparity between students' understanding of the content as evidenced in classroom discussions and group activities and their ability to convey that knowledge in writing.

We set out with the obvious goal of improving student writing, but we also hoped to use written assignments to support student learning of disciplinary content. The intent was to help students integrate knowledge throughout the course, relating what they were learning during that session to prior knowledge. Through the use of reflective journals, we hoped to help students acquire a greater understanding of how children learn to read. Students were asked to write in their reflective journals about a weekly session for ten to fifteen minutes in class. However, if time was needed for an engaging class discussion to continue, this low stakes writing assignment was completed out of class.

At times, the students were asked to respond to a structured question encouraging the integration of content covered earlier in the course. For example, after students had spent several weeks reading, discussing. and viewing videos on the value of read-alouds, shared readings, independent and guided reading, and reading strategies, they were asked to write a response to the following question, "How can a teacher help support the

use of strategies for good reading?" Very often the students were asked to write a response to a less structured question, "How did the material we discussed today increase your understanding of how children learn to read?" At other times, students were given the opportunity for free writing. As students wrote their responses, the instructor and writing fellow also wrote in their journals, hoping to give the students an understanding of why people write.

For all required reading assignments, students were asked to keep learning logs in which they summarized information or responded to important questions. At the beginning of the second session, the writing fellow modeled a learning log technique, which many students adopted. She extracted a meaningful statement from the text, recorded it on the left-hand side of the page and wrote an explanation of the significance of the statement on the right-hand side of the paper. Through the use of learning logs, we expected that students would assume greater responsibility for having the material read before class, enabling them to actively engage in meaningful cooperative learning group activities and large group discussion.

In this article we want to focus on several key points in the semester, look closely at what worked and what didn't work in the classroom, and then examine class outcomes, including grades, course completion data, and student evaluations.

The Importance of Scaffolding

The Goodman Quote: We thought we had prepared students for a low stakes writing assignment by the third week of the semester. They had written several entries in their reflective journals focusing on their observations about how children learn to read and kept learning logs of their reading assignments, which covered similar material. The instructor had distributed material that discussed "Cues, Strategies, Behaviors and Skills," and the students had engaged in activities where they applied their learning about strategies for using the three cueing systems. There were also meaningful small and large group discussions that focused on the importance of observing children as they read.

Fifteen minutes before the end of one class session, students were given a low stakes writing assignment: to respond to Kenneth Goodman's statement "children's reading behavior gives us 'a window on the reading process." Expecting students to discuss how good readers self-moni-

tor and problem-solve when reading, we were puzzled by the responses. The following were typical:

> *Student A*: I agree with Kenneth. I had learn a lot in these class. I learned that different kinds of behavior and strategies children develop through their reading, and how teacher can develop the reading process.
>
> Children reading behavior change according their knowledge and experience they have. When they those element they use strategies that would held them to understand they reading they may use self correction.
>
> *Student B:* Kenneth Goodman is saying in this quotes is that children are very careful in the way they talk and have many different strategies going thru there minds. Every child has a reading method and use different technique to understand the passage better.

In the first response, Student A struggles with basic English syntax to at least show that she has some understanding of the topic and knows the materials well enough to refer to strategies like self-correction. Student B gives a pleasing answer that does not focus on the quotation itself, suggesting that she does not understand how the phrase "reading behavior" is used in its disciplinary context.

The responses from the class did not demonstrate an understanding of Goodman's statement. Yet during class discussions they talked easily about a range of reading behaviors—self-monitoring, crosschecking, sounding out, and confirming. We looked at the assignment and realized that it was both cognitively and linguistically demanding for second language readers and writers: it required a subtle understanding of how the word "behavior" was used in an educational context, one that students did not yet grasp.

Their responses led us to provide students with additional scaffolding activities to assist them in interpreting Goodman's statement. They were asked to write responses to the following two literal comprehension questions:

l) List and explain strategies good readers use in their reading.

2) Why is it important to teach children how to use the three cueing systems in their reading?

In a related activity, the students read in their text about a young boy's "Journey to Literacy." In this "journey"—and we were careful to point out the metaphoric use of the familiar word, clarifying that there was no

actual traveling involved in the text—the child's teachers continually assessed his reading behavior by watching and listening to the child while he read. The child's instructors observed and supported his use of problem-solving reading strategies, such as re-reading and sounding out unfamiliar words. Students completed learning log entries on the "Journey" assignment, giving them opportunities to experiment with the use of disciplinary discourse.

A week later, we reviewed Goodman's statement and asked students to discuss the quotation and what they had learned about the strategies that good readers use. Their responses demonstrated a greater understanding of the term: "reading behavior" as well as greater fluency and ease with their discipline's vocabulary.

> *Student A*: When children are reading they send signs that teachers should pay attention for a better assessing and support. These signs can be fluency in reading, decoding words, linking new words to prior knowledge and the ability to predict when the learner is reading a story.
>
> *Student B*: If a student is reading and having problems pronouncing many words in the passage we know that the student is having problems with the graph phonic cueing system. The students are unable to pronounce every word because he or she does not understand the letter. Another reading behavior is when the student reads a passage over and over because they do not understand. This action shows that the student is having problems understanding the meaning of the sentence. On the other hand, good readers show good reading behavior. They can maintain fluency. They do not get bogged down in words, they monitor their own reading and correct errors. Good readers know how to find the meaning of a new word through reading the passage.

Scaffolding activities—low-stakes writing assignments as well as small and large group discussions—assisted students in writing about higher order questions. Writing was used as a tool to support and strengthen critical thinking. We began to see how scaffolding activities helped these students perform at a level beyond their initial capability. This was clearly demonstrated when students were asked to create a literacy lesson plan.

The Lesson Plan: Education 16's first formal high stakes writing assignment was a literacy lesson plan, an assignment that had often challenged students who had difficulties with its formal requirements and with

writing learning outcomes. After careful consideration as to how this assignment could be scaffolded, the instructor first modeled a literacy lesson plan using chart paper. We then turned the college classroom into a print-rich environment filled with Big Books, children's books of various genres, chart paper filled with children's stories, markers, magnetic letters, and alphabet charts. The students worked with members of their cooperative learning groups examining materials, selecting books, and discussing a literacy lesson plan each of them would want to create and implement. We circulated among the groups encouraging students to focus on defining learning outcomes. Using several language skills in scaffolding activities as preparation for the formal writing assignment clearly assisted students. The lesson plans were creative, well-planned, and well-written. It was obvious that students were becoming more confident about their writing and less anxious about their writing assignments.

The Essay Question: Prior to midterm examinations, we reviewed student performance in previous midterm and final examinations, finding that students tended to provide a "data dump," in John Bean's (1996) memorable description, rather than a focused answer to the particular question. To help students prepare for the midterm, we decided to incorporate a brief scaffolding assignment into midterm preparation. In the midterm review session, after the instructor reviewed course content, the writing fellow gave a 10 minute presentation on typical essay questions and effective approaches to answering them. Students then worked in groups to review and classify several sample essay questions. As a low stakes assignment, they then wrote introductory sentences appropriate for each. Basic and brief, this exercise resulted in students' notably confident approach to writing midterm essay questions. They wrote with greater clarity and purposefulness, which was reflected in higher grades.

The Summary: Students' performance on another high stakes assignment was improved through a brief intervention and a low stakes writing assignment. In reviewing previous summary assignments, we observed that students seemed confused about the imagined audience for such an assignment. Presuming that they had to explain every technical phrase used in an article led them to fill pages with unnecessary explanations and definitions. We developed another scaffolding assignment to address this problem.

After initiating a classroom discussion on the summary and reviewing its basic components, the writing fellow asked students to consider

their audience for the writing assignment, asking such questions as "Do you think you have to explain what a Venn Diagram is to Prof. D'Alessio, or can you assume that she knows what it is?" To help them further focus, she asked: "Do you think your *opinion* is central for this writing task?" Modeling appropriate ways of presenting information seemed to help students greatly. Students approached the assignment with great confidence, and the results were greatly improved in comparison to previous responses. We also found it remarkable that every student in the class turned in the assignment on the day it was due, especially since it was assigned late in the semester, when students were juggling many demands for papers and reports in other classes. It was as if once students felt confident that they fully understood a writing assignment, they were eager to attempt it.

WAC in an ESL Environment

The Woven Incident: While both the course instructor and the writing fellow had years of experience working with BCC's multi-lingual student population, we both were taken aback by our occasional inability to anticipate students' linguistic difficulties. Low stakes assignments proved to be very helpful in alerting us to misunderstandings that stemmed from language differences. An earlier example cited demonstrated this: in writing about the Goodman quotation, students did not understand the use of the word "behavior" in a disciplinary context; when they wrote about "reading behavior," they described the child's outward physical behavior, whether they were restless or paying attention. Another example is what we both now refer to in a sort of shorthand as the "woven incident."

During one class session, students were engrossed in watching a videotape that showed a New York City elementary school teacher working with a series of third grade students in individual reading conferences. While she encouraged the child to read aloud, the teacher kept a "running record," noting when the child hesitated over a word or self-corrected an error, skillfully incorporating assessment into the reading session. The students eagerly volunteered comments and insights when their instructor paused the tape for discussion.

The videotape prompted so much discussion that the instructor had to hurry through the last moments of the class session, giving a low stakes writing assignment as homework rather than as an in-class assignment. They were asked to respond briefly to a question related to the videotape:

"How was assessment woven into the teaching process in the videotape?"

Several hours later several students from the class arrived at the writing fellow's office asking for help with the assignment. The three were so anxious that they were nearly mute. One handed the fellow a hand-written answer to the assessment question; the others watched intently to gauge her response. It was a nearly incoherent paragraph. Preceded by commentary about how hard it is to be a teacher in New York City owing to large class sizes and overcrowded classrooms, it related how the teacher in the videotape had to rush around to get to all her students. The paragraph ended with a platitude about the importance of education for all children. The puzzled fellow, who had attended the class and seen the videotape, asked the student questions to determine why she had perceived the teacher, who appeared supremely serene and confident on the tape, as being harried and rushed. The student wordlessly pointed to a definition of "weave" in the battered and barely adequate Spanish-English dictionary she had with her: the definition described how one uses "rushes" to "weave." A few more questions clarified the situation: the student had written down the homework question that asks how assessment was woven into the teaching process, realized she did not know what "woven" meant, managed to find the root verb "weave" from the irregular participle "woven" in her dictionary, but could not decipher the dictionary's strange use of what for her was the familiar verb "rush." Out of desperation she seized on the concept of "rushing" as she understood it and applied it to the situation she had seen on the videotape. She knew she was wrong, just as her two silent companions knew they had seriously misunderstood the question. They were both worried and dismayed for they had understood the videotape and participated enthusiastically in the classroom discussion that followed.

Once the "woven" problem was resolved by brief consultations with another dictionary and a few clarifying questions, the fellow conferred with the instructor. At the beginning of the next session, the instructor reviewed the homework question, eliciting from the students their understanding of its meaning. Many of students had similar problems with the metaphoric use of "weave"; once they understood the word in the context of the sentence, they were able to rewrite their answers to the question. Not surprisingly the rewritten answers were a great improvement over the homework assignments. The low stakes assignment disclosed the confusion, which could then be clarified. Had such a question been

given in a midterm examination, many students would have written about overburdened NYC teachers, and the instructor would have been bewildered by their responses.

The Disciplinary Connection

Introducing WAC techniques into this particular education course proved to be an excellent decision. Since the content area focused closely on the acquisition of language skills, there was a clear correspondence between ED 16 students developing their own successful writing strategies and the early learners described in their textbooks. In addition, there was a dynamic combination of elements in the ED 16 classroom that made it an excellent environment not only to improve writing skills but also to stimulate higher order and critical thinking. ED 16 was a multi-modal class: students were asked to speak, read, listen, write, and manipulate the materials they might use in an elementary school classroom. Students could activate their own prior and personal knowledge of the subject with the theories about which they were reading and writing. They remembered their own struggles with reading, especially in an unfamiliar language. Since many were interns or involved in field placements, they were often witnessing early reading activities and participating in literacy lessons in elementary school classrooms while they were enrolled in the class. Their own children's experiences as learners was often foremost in their minds when they read. Students had many ideas and observations to contribute, and the ground was well-prepared to encourage them to express their thoughts.

Outcomes

Students' enhanced understanding of subject matter and improved writing skills were reflected in their performances on midterm and final examinations and in high stakes, formal, graded writing assignments. Improvements in student grades and class completion rates were striking when compared to the previous semester: all enrolled students passed the course (20% failed in the previous semester), and 56% earned either an A or a B (compared to 31% in fall 1999). All students completed class requirements; there were no incomplete grades.

Students were asked to comment on course writing assignments, and their responses were universally positive. (Please note: these are verbatim responses given in an in-class low stakes writing assignment.)

"The writing in this course helped me to self-examine myself in writing lesson plans on how effective I am each time I teach."

"The writing in this course has affected my performance by helping me in thinking and writing more abstractly . . .Critical thinking was something I've learned in Education 16. The writing has enhanced my understanding of what's to be expected of me in a workplace. My writing in this course has advanced to a level I thought wasn't possible.

"This practice had impact on my performance in more than one way. Now my writing flows more easily. The way I read for my own enjoyment is full of critical thinking. I learned that people learn to write by writing. Writing is not such a frightening experience to me."

"The writing in this course affected my performance a great deal. I know how to express my ideas better and I have a better understanding of the articles I read."

"I try to use my words and not plagiarize. I know what to do when I have to write a summary."

Next Steps

Of course, we are curious to examine whether or not the improvements we saw in the ED 16 students are sustained over time: whether or not they have developed the habit of mind" to keep learning logs, analyze the audience for each writing task, and "self-examine" their own teaching and learning. There is anecdotal evidence that many have; many Education students take a capstone course, ED 40, and instructors teaching that course have reported improvements, especially in the writing skills of former ED 16 students. We hope to find a way to follow these students as they pursue careers or continue their education to observe whether this ED 16 experience continues to influence their writing and thinking.

Reference

Bean, J.C. (1996). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.