

From Otherization to Collaboration in the English Composition Classroom: A Look at the Effectiveness of Teacher-Student Collaboration

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Abstract

This essay is a critical review of literature on the topic of instructor-student collaboration and its potential improvement of student writing performance in the college-level English composition classroom. Moreover, this review of literature highlights a broad range of literature and experts on this topic with the aim of highlighting a critical gap or void within this area of writing pedagogy, and student learning. In addition, the pieces of literature comprising this review of literature presents critical and pedagogically insightful findings that call attention to many specific writing challenges, as well as the educational, ethnic, and cultural discrimination commonly experienced by many nontraditional adult writing students within today's modern college-level English classroom.

Keywords: Otherization; Writing Workshops; Collaboration; Adult Writers; Discrimination; Cognitive Development;

1. Introduction

The college-level classroom as a workplace for instructors is often overlooked in the area of professional workplace development and workplace learning. Instructor suppression, discrimination, and labeling beginning English composition students as “the other” due to weak writing skills is a problem that I have seen quite often within the college classroom, as well as the vast field of English instruction as a whole. The primary goal of the following review of literature is to highlight what has been found regarding the impact of a “collaborative” classroom environment between teacher and student, and thus, what needs to be found or added to the body of literature in this area of pedagogy. Therefore, the guiding question for this review of literature is: Does an increased level of instructor-student collaboration result in an improved level of student writing performance in the college-level English composition classroom?

2. Otherization in the English Composition Classroom

There is a broad spectrum of adult writing students that enter into the English composition classroom and the challenges they often face with the writing process (Hansman & Wilson, 1998; Berthoff, 2003; Bizzell, 2003). There is also a diverse community of writers that stand as the nucleus of American writing programs that are frequently otherized due to their weak standard English composition skills (Hansman & Wilson, 1998). One qualitative dissertation study found that adult writing students are otherized due to their language and culture, as well as writing weaknesses, but fails to show if student-instructor collaboration would increase student writing performance or cultural otherization. For instance, Rodriguez (1999) discusses the discrimination of culture she experienced as a non-native student in her English composition course, which initiated her passion to change this very common discriminatory phenomena. Rodriguez (1999) states, “The instructor told me that my second language was interfering with my thinking, and therefore my writing. I was angry. I knew she was wrong” (p. 2). This is an explicit example of the academic and cultural otherization that often occurs in the English composition classroom that instructors in the field must learn to avoid through professional development.

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One major limitation found in this dissertation study is that it does not indicate the type of professional development strategies that instructors can utilize to avoid otherization. Moreover, it fails to address the research question regarding the effectiveness of instructor-student collaboration techniques, or what measures can be taken to implement this teaching approach into the classroom. Rather, it simply presents the issue of student otherization and fails to present methods of addressing this critical issue.

Shaughnessy (2003) presents a very critical argument highlighting how all beginning writing students should be given the opportunity to develop their rhetorical skills and abilities without being labeled as “the other” by authoritative figures within the field of writing pedagogy. Upon an analysis of Shaughnessy’s essay, it was shown that like Rodriguez (1999), she presents an issue that is widely known in the field; instructors otherizing students of low-level writing ability to idealize the status of the English department, as well as the academy as a whole. Regarding the research question at hand: how a focus on instructor-student collaboration can increase writing ability and ultimately eliminate the phenomenon of instructors feeling the need to otherize students, studies indicate that student-centered classes and high academic performance are strongly correlated (Miglietti & Strange, 1998; Freeland, 2002; Louth, McAllister, & McAllister, 1998; Lueders, 2003; Lunsford, 2003).

3. Psychoanalysis of the Students’ Writing

The professional development literature in the area of English composition presents an interesting concept on how the psychoanalysis of a student’s writing is one method of eliminating labeling and otherization in the English composition classroom. A qualitative dissertation study found that non-native speakers of English would especially benefit from a thorough psychoanalysis of their writing due to their natural lack of experience with standard academic English writing (Rahilly, 2004). Moreover, the qualitative research-based article of Matsuda (1999) found that the adult writer seems to be becoming the dominant face of the college and university English composition classroom and have been continuously increasing for decades. These studies indicate that observing and discussing the flaws with the student and inquiring with the student why he/she made specific writing choices, can ultimately give the instructor insight into the student’s thinking process and a stronger foundation to constructively criticize the student’s weaknesses in writing (Freud, 1961). Interestingly, Rahilly’s (2004) qualitative dissertation study also found that many adult ESL students demonstrated weaknesses in the basic conventions of academic writing in both their native language, and English.

The literature suggests that the adult writers’ lack of advanced composing ability is due to lack of adequate training at the high school, extended absence from the conventional classroom, and the instructor’s act of labeling them as “The Other” (Miglietti & Strange, 1998; Matsuda, 1999; Ritchie, 2005; Rose, 1988). Also, a published conference paper discusses how integrating interactive writing activities into the classroom and observing students’ learning response to these activities can also provide an instructor insight into writing weaknesses that the student is exhibiting (Ocak, Ozcalisan, & Kuru, 2010). Moreover, one study found that although both native and non-native speakers of English experience difficulty with the academic writing process, few composition theorists include second-language teaching techniques for ESL students (Matsuda, 1999). These studies illustrate the lack of effective instructor teaching techniques that commonly deters beginning writers’ rhetorical progress.

4. Establishing a New Identity

In regard to identity transformation, the professional development literature in the field of English composition instruction also discusses how the instructor establishing a new identity is an effective method of eliminating the frequency of alienation, and labeling in the English composition classroom (Zeller, 1987; Ritchie, 2005; Freeland, 2002; Shaughnessy, 2003). Lueders’ (2003) qualitative research article looked at the idea of the writing instructor’s willingness to adapt the role of “editor” and retire the conventional, intimidating role of “English teacher.” The study found that students develop a much deeper respect and value for their own writing due to the “collaborative” nature of an editor’s work. The study also found that when the writing instructor adapts the role of editor, there is a unique bond that develops between teacher and student.

5. Cognitive Development of the Adult Writer

Regarding the discrimination that has plagued many beginning adult writers for generations, one theorist who presents a very controversial argument on this issue is Lunsford (2003). Her study asserts that beginning adult writers often experience difficulty thinking on diverse, analytical, and academic levels, ultimately failing to transfer their individual, personal thinking ability within one discipline to another.

Lunsford presents to us a very provocative passage which appears to be highly inaccurate, and stereotypical. She states that in her study of basic writers, their strategies, processes, and products lead her to believe that they have not attained the ideal level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or conceptions: “That is, they are most often unable to practice analysis and synthesis and to apply successfully the principles thus derived to college tasks. In short, our students might well perform a given task in a specific situation, but they have great difficulty abstracting it or replicating it in another context” (p. 299).

In this passage, Lunsford is suggesting that beginning writers are in dire need of adequate cognitive development in order to perform as a competent writer. She asserts that they must be exposed to a specific set of tools and pedagogical resources in an effort to adapt to a multitude of academic tasks, rather than a singular task within a specific discipline. Spack’s (1988) study found that “Student’s social situation and previous training may hamper their ability to succeed in the academy” (p. 30). The study also found that student’s weaknesses in academic writing may not be the result of an innate lack of academic writing ability, but the social and cultural factors that impact their writing (Spack, 1988). Poor classroom social experiences combined with deficient writing background may result in these beginners developing an enormous lack of self-esteem, a mediocre writing ability, and a strong attachment to fear, ultimately suffocating creativity and all levels of the imagination (Spack, 1988; Rahilly, 2004; Rodriguez, 1999; Callahan, 1999; McGoarty & Zhu, 1997). Moreover, other writing theorists such as Berlin (1982), Bizzell (2003), and Rose (1988) firmly reject Lunsford’s narrow view of beginning writer’s cognitive deficiency stating that all students indeed possess the ability to analyze and synthesize and have potential for success within the academy.

In the area of professional development, Zeller (1987), a writing professor at Southeast Missouri State University works with his students to develop inferential reasoning. In his qualitative study entitled *Developing the Inferential Reasoning of Basic Writers*, he found that as his students participated in analyzing various photographs and oral histories that their cognitive abilities to analyze and synthesize information as a whole became stronger. The study also found that students became more aware of their mental processes and their ability to analyze on multifaceted levels. Writing theorist Berthoff (2003) asserts that the teacher’s job is to create a series of assignments which encourage conscientization and the discovery of the mind in action. They ultimately visualize the emotional, cultural, and educational background issues which may be hindering their development as a writer.

6. Writing Workshops as a Teaching Strategy

A study found that interactive writing workshops can also be used to enhance student writing skills in the English classroom (Louth, McAllister, & McAllister, 1993). This study found from the responses of participants that mastery of the writing process for the adult writer involves much more than mirroring scholarly characteristics of the academy, or simply acquiring the ability to be multi-tasked with various academic subjects. Louth, McAllister, and McAllister (1993) state, “interactive writing is collaborative writing in which group members interact during the various stages of the writing process, but where individual authors are ultimately responsible for their own work” (p. 217). A more recent research article, Ritchie (2005) presents a very enlightening passage in her essay entitled *Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity* which highlights the rhetorical benefits that basic writers reap from experiencing a “dialogic” and interactive classroom setting:

Students in writing workshops are [. . .] encouraged to explore new forms of thinking and writing and to find new ways to organize and understand their experience. They work with their peers in small groups to gain a better grasp of the perspective of their audience, to learn more about the varied viewpoints a writer might address, and to experiment with effective strategies for writing. (p. 155)

Overall, this research article found that the beginning writer inherits a strong sense of individuality, confidence, creativity, and self-efficacy about writing while participating in writing workshops. Four research studies found that classroom activities which involve peer interaction have a significant impact on student writing and student attitudes toward writing (Callahan, 1999; Berlin, 1982; Hansman & Wilson, 1993; Lueders, 2003). Three additional research studies in this area found that students who are exposed to a multitude of perspectives from other peers tend to ignite new effective ways to brainstorm rhetorical ideas that they had not encountered within the conventional, teacher centered classroom setting (Berlin, 1982; Matsuda, 1999; Rose, 1988). Revising others essays not only trains students in the revision process, but also teaches the *value* of the revision process (McGroarty & Zhu, 1995). The student is exposed to a variety of thought processes and personalities displayed by his or her other peers, which allows him or her the flexibility and freedom to absorb unlimited levels of imagination and inspiration.

7. Synthesis of the Literature

The above review of literature is comprised of various research-based qualitative articles, doctoral dissertation studies, and conference papers that present research findings illuminating the writing challenges and the dark phenomenon of “otherization” experienced by the adult writing student within the college-level English classroom. Upon a thorough analysis of this literature, information regarding the best practices of collaborative teaching and learning techniques between instructor and student is severely lacking in the body of literature as a whole, and the information that currently exist is very minimal. The majority of the literature presented in the above review very strongly presents the problem of students being otherized and alienated by their English instructors due to weaknesses in formal academic writing standards yet provides little, or no information regarding the effectiveness of student-teacher collaboration, or if this phenomenon would maximize or minimize student writing performance. Moreover, the literature that does present collaboration as an effective learning tool is ultimately in the area of students collaborating with each other with the instructor as an absent entity. Ultimately, this review of literature shows that the body of literature as a whole in the field of English composition instruction is very unbalanced and needs to better reflect the instructor as a more active, “collaborative” participant in the English composition student’s learning process.

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