

Together We Stand: Using Collaborative Writing in Developmental Writing Courses

MONICA D'ANTONIO
MONTGOMERY COUNTY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Teaching developmental writing courses is a high-wire act, complicated by its need to balance both rudimentary skill-building and college-level writing preparation. However, many developmental writing instructors spend most of their time on the former, focusing on rote memorization of grammar rules and sentence skills development, which often leaves students feeling unmotivated and anxious about their writing. This article offers an effective teaching method aimed at increasing student success in developmental writing courses by taking an active-learning approach, known here as the “class essay,” that emphasizes the entire writing process, not just the building blocks of the English language. Additionally, this article explains the benefits of collaborative writing in general, details the “class essay” approach specifically, and describes the observed results of using this method.

Introduction

Teaching developmental writing courses can be a complex endeavor. Developmental students enter college with below-average writing skills, minimal awareness of what it means to be a writer in an academic setting, and, typically, anxiety over the entire writing process. These negative feelings are often compounded by spending one or more semesters in developmental classes that focus strictly on grammar, spelling, and sentence skills. The lack of student engagement coupled with the stigma surrounding these courses can often lead to poor retention, lack of success, and lowered graduation rates for developmental students.

This article offers an effective teaching method aimed at increasing student success in developmental writing courses by taking an active-learning approach, known here as the “class essay,” that focuses on the entire writing process, not just the building blocks of the English language. Additionally, this article

explains the benefits of collaborative writing in general, details the “class essay” approach specifically, and illustrates the observed results of using the class essay.

Background

Writing is traditionally seen and taught as a solitary process. The assumption that writing is always done in isolation, however, causes apprehension in developing writers and, more importantly, does not reflect the full extent to which writing can, in fact, include a highly collaborative revision process. This problem, then, begs the question posed by Speck (2002) in his report *Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing*: “Does it not make better sense to use writing in our classrooms to mirror the ways that texts are produced... than to confuse the fiction of authorial attribution as the way writing gets done?” (p. 7). In Speck’s estimation, collaborative writing is the best way to reinforce a process-oriented writing approach in the classroom (pp. 7-8).

According to Speck, “Collaborative writing fits nicely with the premises that support cooperative learning and logically shares the pedagogical presuppositions of active learning” (p.8). Active learning, proven to be one of the most effective pedagogical strategies, is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. It requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing (Prince 2004). Active learning has been shown to be highly successful in increasing students’ comprehension of, interest in, and use of subject matter. In a recent study on active learning versus passive learning in two psychology courses, researchers Smith and Cadaciotto (2011) found that “students in the active learning condition reported greater retention of course material for the majority of topics as well as the course material as a whole” (p. 57). Additionally, the researchers show that “students in the active learning condition also reported greater engagement with the class material” (p. 57).

Active learning’s role in the English classroom has also been studied. Citing Sutherland and Bonwell, Remler (2002) argued that the “evidence supporting the benefits of active learning is ‘too compelling to ignore’” (Remler, p. 240). Drawing from McKeachie,

Pintrich, Lin, and Smith (1986), Remler also concluded that active learning “helps students ‘become aware of strategies for learning and problem solving’” (p. 240). In accordance with her own use of active learning in her English classes, Remler stated

My assumption is that the more actively students are engaged in a lesson..., the more engaged they will be in the subject matter and the better opportunity they will have to learn and apply course concepts. My experiences, as well as student reactions to class activities, seem to validate this assumption. (p. 241)

Using various collaborative techniques in her English classes, Remler stated that

[a]s students take the teacher’s role by generating questions and guiding discussions, they not only have the most active role in the classroom, but they also boost their enthusiasm and confidence by revealing to the class (and themselves) their knowledge of the concepts they are studying. They act responsibly as they realize the intellectual investment (as well as time investment) required to lead a class. (p. 241)

Cooperative learning, as a subset of the active learning movement, is another area of ongoing interest in educational research. Mar (1997) described cooperative learning as “instructional techniques or grouping structures in which students are divided into heterogeneous groups to complete instructional activities” (p. 8). In addition, Mar supported the effectiveness of collaborative learning by citing Johnson and Johnson (1989) and Totten, Sills, Digby and Ross (1991), who concluded that the “[r]esults from a meta-analysis of these [cooperative learning environments] data reveal that the average students in the cooperative situations outperformed in a variety of areas their counterparts in competitive and individualistic environments” (p. 9). This information becomes important in the area of writing instruction, which is often taught as an individualistic endeavor.

Collaborative writing, as an extension of active and collaborative learning models, has become a popular method of instruction in many composition courses because it helps to debunk

the myth of the solitary writer and increases students' confidence by allowing them to work together to develop their skills. Peter Elbow (1999) explained the benefit of collaborative writing in his article "Using the Collage for Collaborative Writing":

When people write alone, they make countless simple and complex writerly decisions tacitly, instinctively - without articulating the reasons for them. . . . But the process of writing with someone else forces us to put many of these decisions into words . . . the process of collaborative writing forces students to become more conscious and articulate about the rhetorical decision making. (p. 261)

It is precisely for this reason that collaborative writing is most useful for developmental students who may not yet fully understand their own writing processes, let alone college-level writing expectations. The collaborative environment provides an active, safe space that increases students' confidence in writing, guides them through the writing process, and encourages them to think logically and critically about their writing.

As writing instructors, we want our students to understand the writing process, but, more importantly, we want them to use the writing process. We want them to brainstorm and outline. We want them to be messy—cross out, draw arrows, write notes in the margins, and cut and paste. We want them to debate with themselves about necessary information, diction, organization, grammar, spelling, and mechanics. We want them to share their work with others. We want them to proofread, edit, and revise.

However, as we know, this process rarely happens to the extent that it should. Most students seldom engage themselves in intellectual discussions about their writing processes. They rarely proofread, read their work aloud, or have someone review their work. How can instructors help them see that breaking a larger task down into smaller, more manageable steps often leads to success? We could choose to tell them that these steps are effective, or we could show them that these steps are effective.

The "Class Essay" Approach

As a developmental specialist, I am primarily responsible for teaching developmental courses within the English department, particularly the second-level developmental course, ENG 011. ENG 011, the last developmental course before the college-level ENG 101 course, is typically taught as a "paragraph class." The course has a heavy grammatical emphasis, and the summative assessment of the course is taking three timed paragraph "tests" in which the students must write 250-word, error-free paragraphs on random prompts selected by the instructor. Most of the time, students have no foreknowledge of the prompt, nor do they get much time to plan, draft, write, proofread, edit, or revise.

After teaching the course in this manner, I decided that ENG 011 did not give students enough exposure to the actual writing process, nor did it provide an adequate bridge to ENG 101 (the college-level writing course) where students will have to write academic essays that involve critical thinking, research, and citations. Therefore, I changed my ENG 011 course to be a five-paragraph essay course that incorporated intense guided instruction, collaborative writing, and more individualized help in the forms of tutoring and conferences. I also began using a "theme" (gender and popular culture) for the course so that students would have a consistent and focused topic to write about throughout the entire semester.

I understood that if I incorporated essay writing into my developmental course, the students would have to feel as comfortable and as supported as possible. They would also need to see firsthand the effectiveness of using a process-oriented method of writing. Therefore, in order to provide a supportive environment for developmental essay writers and in an effort to model the full writing process as it should occur, I instituted the "Class Essay" as a method of approaching the students' first essay assignment of the semester. This approach guides them together as a class through all of the stages of the writing process, from brainstorming and outlining to an edited piece of critical prose.

During the first few weeks of class, I lead my students in a series of discussions on our selected topic, most of which focus on

the ways in which the media portrays masculinity and femininity and, in turn, shapes male and female behavior and ideology. I approach these discussions with an eye toward completing the first major writing assignment, an exemplification essay that asks the students to examine the questionable gender values illustrated in the movie *Twilight*. Before we write, I conduct a brief overview of the five-paragraph essay. We also analyze a sample essay written by a former student, highlighting, underlining, and taking notes on the distinct parts of the essay and discussing their functions. Once we have covered these issues, we begin the “Class Essay.”

On day one, we read the writing assignment together as a class. I ask the students to explain the prompt to me in their own words. After establishing the prompt’s purpose, the students free-write on the topic for three minutes. Building upon this free-writing activity, the students then share their ideas with the class, and those ideas are recorded on the whiteboard. The students spend time grouping similar ideas together under broad topic headings before selecting the three most important topics that they want to explore in the paper. The students then use these topics to create an outline of the body of the essay. I stress the fact that the students will refer to this outline throughout the writing process. I also explain that having all of the evidence in an outline first will make it easier to construct a thesis later, rather than beginning with the thesis and then trying to make the evidence work around it.

Using the outline from day one, the students spend day two in small groups of three or four, working on thesis statements. Each group constructs a thesis, which is then put on the board for the entire class to review. After working on and revising each group’s thesis statement, the class then votes on which thesis is the best, and that becomes the thesis statement for the class essay. Once the class has constructed the thesis, each student must write an introductory paragraph for homework and bring it to the next class meeting. To encourage students to write on their own, I award homework points for this assignment.

In the next class, I assign new groups, and the students in each group share their homework paragraphs with each other.

Each group then creates a new introductory paragraph using ideas from each person’s homework paragraph. The students are not allowed to use one person’s entire paragraph; they must construct a new paragraph together. An elected member of the group types up the completed paragraph and emails it to me. I then make copies of each paragraph in preparation for our writing workshop in the next class meeting.

On day three, writing workshop day, I distribute hard copies of the paragraphs that the groups wrote in the previous class. The students pair up and spend the first ten minutes of class commenting on and editing each paragraph. After the small group workshop, I project each paragraph on the SmartBoard, and, using the students’ feedback, we make changes to each paragraph. I use the Microsoft “track changes” function so that the students can see the revisions happening live. After all of the paragraphs have been revised at least once, we accept all changes, read each paragraph again, and then vote on which one we want to serve as the class introduction. Once the students have voted, I put the selected paragraph on the class’s Blackboard¹ site so that the students can see and refer back to each paragraph as we continue to build the essay.

My students repeat this process with the remaining four paragraphs until they have five completed paragraphs. After we have voted on all five paragraphs, the students must copy and paste the paragraphs from the Blackboard site into a Microsoft Word document and format the essay according to Modern Language Association (MLA) guidelines. The students are free to make any additional changes to the essay as they see fit, although they are not obliged to do so.

The students must then take the essay to a writing tutor on campus and get feedback for improvement². The feedback is typically minimal since we all worked together to revise each paragraph thoroughly as we went along; however, I include

¹ There are many ways that this approach can be done without the use of advanced technology like Blackboard. Multimedia projectors, wikis, or even just writing paragraphs on a chalkboard or whiteboard could be effective.

² Colleges with limited tutoring availability can use online tutoring services, or the instructor can use one-on-one student/teacher conferences instead of tutoring services.

this step so that the students learn where the tutoring center is and, hopefully, meet a tutor that they like and trust. They will be required to take their next two essays to the tutor as well; therefore, requiring students to go first with a paper that is fairly good enables them to gain confidence in their writing skills. Based on the tutor's feedback, the students revise the essay and turn the original and revised drafts in to me for additional feedback. After receiving more comments from me, the students revise again and put all three drafts in their writing portfolios, which I collect and grade at the end of the semester.

This project usually takes over six weeks to complete (my class meets three days per week, but I only work on writing two of the three days because I spend one day solely on grammar) and typically works best with classes that meet three days per week.

Results

I am entering my third year of using this method, and I have observed some interesting behaviors throughout the process. First, when students share their homework paragraphs with their peers, they get a chance to see how other students in the class write. This helps them recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, and they are more likely to use the "vocabulary" of writing to describe those strengths and weaknesses. I have overheard students say, "I forgot a concluding sentence," or "I don't have any transition words in my paragraph," or "I think we should go with my topic sentence because yours doesn't echo the thesis."

When students combine their homework paragraphs into one group paragraph, they experience how the real writing process takes place. The students debate word choice, structure, transitions, and details. For example, I've heard a few students snickering that their paragraph was going to be chosen because they had "the best vocabulary words." Another group said that their paragraph "sounded like a Power Point presentation" because there were no transitions connecting their ideas. This evidence suggests that the group work enables students to better understand the elements of good writing and, therefore, look more critically at their own writing.

Many students are driven by the competitiveness of the class workshop days when they vote on the group paragraphs. I often hear students say, "Our paragraph is going to win," and students will sometimes high-five their group mates if the class selects their paragraph. The students take pride in their work and want their paragraphs to be chosen. For many of them, competition is the great motivator because it validates their abilities as writers.

The group writing also elicits frustrations that are common to the writing process. I often see students crossing out entire paragraphs, ripping up papers, and grunting in dissatisfaction. Most of this angst comes from figuring out what to say next, where a sentence belongs, or whether or enough evidence is present. When I see this happening, I shout, "I see writers in Group 2!" because I want them to know that this is exactly what the writing process should look and sound like.

Additionally, the class workshops allow students to see how the proofreading and revision stages work and how beneficial these steps really are. When the students hear their classmates' critiques, they can see how many problems they missed when they either reviewed their work on their own or did not review their work at all. The students begin to see that peer review, tutoring, and reading aloud are significant steps in the writing process.

After the class essay assignment, the students are on their own to complete the final two essays for the semester. However, because of the time spent doing the class essay, students seem much more comfortable and relaxed when approaching these writing tasks. They understand what is expected of them and feel more confident in meeting those expectations. More importantly, they have seen how a writing process works, and they know how to use it effectively.

Some Preliminary Data on the "new" ENG 011

Since beginning this new method of teaching ENG 011 three years ago, I have trained five full- and part-time faculty members to teach the course in the same way, and we have just started collecting data on success rates in the new version of the course, as well as students' success rates in college-level English courses

after completing ENG 011. Preliminary data from Fall 2008 to Spring 2010 show that students' success rates in the new ENG 011 course are on par with, and sometimes better than, the college's ENG 011 success rates overall. More importantly, however, the data suggest that students who pass the new ENG 011 have greater success in ENG 101 than do the students who pass the traditional version of ENG 011. Additionally, the students in the new ENG 011 have higher average pass rates in ENG 101 than the average college-wide passing rates for ENG 101.

In fall 2008, the first semester that I ran the new course, students in my ENG 011 courses had a 68% pass rate compared to the college-wide ENG 011 pass rate at 61.9%. By fall 2009, I had three additional instructors working with me on this new course, and at the end of the fall 2009 semester, the cohort of instructors using the new model had an average pass rate of 78.8%. The average ENG 011 success rate college-wide in fall 2009 was only 68.2%.

Additionally, the preliminary research also shows that students in the new version of ENG 011 are succeeding at higher rates in college-level English and are taking the college-level English course almost immediately following the developmental course. In one instructor's fall 2008 – spring 2009 developmental courses taught in the traditional manner, 20 students passed ENG 011 and went on to take ENG 101 in the subsequent semester. Eighty percent of those students passed ENG 101. Under the new curriculum used in fall 2009 to spring 2010, 23 of her developmental students passed ENG 011 and went on to take ENG 101 in the subsequent semester; 95% of those students passed ENG 101. Therefore, while the number of students passing ENG 011 was similar between the traditional and new models, the pass rate in the subsequent college-level writing course was higher for the group who took the new ENG 011.

While this is only one semester of data, early evidence suggests that the students who take the new version of the ENG 011 course are more likely to take the ENG 101 course in the subsequent semester and pass that college-level writing course. In data collected on my own ENG 011 courses from fall 2008 through fall 2009, the average pass rate of the students who completed

the new version of ENG 011 and passed ENG 101 in the subsequent semester was 82%. The average passing rate for ENG 101 at the college in general during those same years was only 65.5%, thereby suggesting that students who complete the new ENG 011 are having greater success in ENG 101 even when compared to the entire campus community and not just to other developmental students.

Since the data provided here are strictly preliminary, it is important to note that more research is necessary in order to show the benefits of this new curriculum, such as the pass rates in ENG 101 for students who placed directly into the college-level writing course (bypassing ENG 011) and the pass rates in ENG 101 for students who completed the traditional version of ENG 101. This information will give us a more comprehensive view as to the actual effect of the new curriculum.

While student success in developmental courses is extremely important, success in college-level courses is even more so. Therefore, if students have successful, engaging, and motivating writing experiences in their developmental courses, this may likely translate into greater success in credited, college-level courses as well.

Anecdotally, my colleagues who teach the college-level English courses state that they can see distinct differences in the critical thinking skills and writing abilities from the students who have completed the new ENG 011 course versus the students who have taken the traditional developmental course that focuses mainly on sentence and paragraph skills.

Additionally, it must be noted that the biggest difference between the traditional and new versions of ENG 011 is that students taking the new ENG 011 are writing essays. That, in and of itself, would make them more prepared for ENG 101 than would the traditional ENG 011 course. However, teaching the essay alone will not set students up for success in future writing courses. Students have to learn how to *think* about their writing. The collaborative writing process does just that. When students write an essay paragraph by paragraph as a class, they are not just learning how to write clear, error-free sentences. They are learning

all of the skills that are necessary to be successful writers. They are learning how to break big projects into smaller, more manageable pieces. They are learning critical thinking and organization. They are learning what good writing looks like to the eye and sounds like to the ear. They are learning how to talk about their writing. All of these lessons make them more comfortable with writing in general, which can ultimately lead to success in the college-level writing course.

Conclusion

Any person who has ever worked on a significant piece of writing, whether a dissertation or an article for publication, knows that good writing is a process—not just a solitary process, but a collaborative one as well. Therefore, it behooves us as writing instructors to show students the actual writing process as we know it, in its full form, and not mislead them into thinking that good writing is merely the product of rote memorization of heavily proscribed rules and structures. By incorporating the “class essay” approach to the teaching of writing, teachers can actively engage their students in the classroom, inspire critical discussion and reflection, and illustrate the undeniable benefits of the writing process.

References

- Elbow, P. (1999). Using the collage for collaborative writing. In Susan N. Bernstein (Ed.) *Teaching Developmental Writing* (pp. 260-268). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Marr, M. (1997). Cooperative learning: a brief review. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 13, 7- 14.
- Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Ed.). (2002). *Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing*. Washington, D.C.: Bruce W. Speck.
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93 (3), 223-231.
- Remler, N. (2002). The more active the better: engaging college English students with active learning strategies. In Susan N. Bernstein (Ed.) *Teaching Developmental Writing* (pp.239-245). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Smith, V., & Cardaciotto, L. (2011). Is active learning like broccoli? Student perceptions of active learning in large lecture classes, *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(1), 53-61.

Monica D'Antonio is assistant professor of English at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell, PA.