

Motivating Basic Writers through Self-Assessment and Goal-Setting

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It has long been established that self-assessment and goal-setting are regular features of the writing process of experienced writers. It has also been demonstrated that students develop more power and control over their writing when they are encouraged to become their own evaluators. Therefore, to help beginning writers think and act more like successful writers, teachers must integrate reflection and self-assessment as core components of English writing instruction. This article summarizes how one Basic Writing course actively engages students in consistent formal and informal self-assessment and goal-setting activities that encourage them to develop a “writerly” mindset as they modify their behaviors to better approximate those of experienced writers.

How can we better motivate beginning writers to confront the difficult yet joyful task of writing – to understand deeply what they are doing and to figure out how to do it better? Guided by composition theory (Elbow, 1982; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1972), for decades writing instructors have fittingly encouraged students to put ink/toner to paper, to talk about their ideas and intentions, and to witness the effect their writing has on an audience, all in an effort to help students realize that successful writers take responsibility for their own learning and become self-regulated writers (Zimmerman, 1990). The ground-breaking research of Emig (1971, 1983), Perl (1979, 1980), Flower and Hayes (1981), and Sommers (1980) showed that self-assessment and goal-setting are regular features of the writing process of experienced writers, and these researchers’ findings have spurred many teachers to help student writers develop those important

competencies. As established by Black and Wiliam's comprehensive review (1998) and demonstrated by Lee (1997), O'Neill (1998), Oppenheimer (2001), and others, a classroom atmosphere that makes self-assessment and goal-setting central to the teaching process can move students toward self-regulation and increased achievement. O'Neill (1998), in particular, stresses that students develop more power and control over their writing when they are encouraged to become their own evaluators; therefore, reflection and self-assessment must be core components of English writing instruction. This article summarizes how one Basic Writing course actively engages students in consistent formal and informal self-assessment and goal-setting activities that encourage them to develop a "writerly" mindset as they modify their behaviors to better approximate those of experienced writers.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: CREATING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND WRITERS

Rather than stifle student interest by grinding through a review of the syllabus, many college professors start the first class of the term with an ice-breaker of some kind – an activity to help students feel as if they are part of a community of learners, diverse individuals working together to improve their written communication skills. But why stop with community building? True to my first-day and oft-repeated promise that I will not waste students' time, the first activity of the term is designed to help students realize that they already know a great deal about setting a goal and about the importance of team work, of effort, of perseverance, and of imitating an appropriate model. Moreover, they are often surprised to discover that they even have some preliminary goals for their own development as writers.

We start with mini-interviews conducted in groups of three – small enough to be non-threatening, yet large enough to require some attention to time management. The following five interview items are designed to elicit non-invasive personal information appropriate for classroom interaction and to keep students focused on their roles as writers:

1. Demographic information (family, current job, favorite sport, pets, etc.).
2. College major and/or career goal. “Undecided” is an acceptable answer.
3. Area of expertise. Brag a little. Tell about something you are good at, something you have recently learned to do, or an area of interest.
4. List some “keys” to learning the above skill or to researching your area of interest. In other words, what do you DO when you learn?
5. Name one or more things you would like to learn more about, related to writing.

After the triads complete their mini-interviews, each student introduces another student to the class, and some listeners take turns summarizing on the board the responses to the five items. The result is a chart with five columns: Name, Major, Area of Expertise/Interest, Keys to Mastery, and Writing Goals. The creation of the chart affords many opportunities for the instructor and students to “connect,” to learn from, and to indicate respect for one another’s expertise. As they examine the Keys column, students typically begin to realize that the development of expertise takes effort – whether in the form of practicing/perseverance, creative problem solving, following a model, or help-seeking. The creation of the Writing Goals column requires students to assess their writing abilities and to name writing-related skills they have not yet mastered. The Writing Goals column also suggests that the instructor plans to help students achieve their writing goals rather than merely to trudge through the curriculum – a perception that must be honored. Leamson (1999) calls such strategic use of the first class meeting “getting down to business” or “hitting the ground running” (p. 85). First impressions set the tone for the term; and emphasizing respect, self-assessment, goal setting, effort, and writing during the first class meeting helps prepare students for the challenging work of writing – and for a rewarding academic experience overall.

SHOWING OFF: BEGINNING “SENTENCE WORK” WITH INDIRECT SELF-ASSESSMENT

Teachers may plan a sequence of grammar and punctuation lessons, or they may teach mini-lessons as the need arises. Either way, they often discover that native speakers of English are quite skilled in forming grammatical sentences. To take advantage of students’ considerable prior knowledge and to help them identify their “rusty” areas, I precede each sentence structure or punctuation lesson with a “Show Off” exercise of a half dozen items, asking students to work with a partner to manipulate sentences in relevant ways, “showing off” what they already know about the structure under consideration. Their interactions with each other and with the sentences help them gauge their skill levels. They may be pleased to discover that they have considerable mastery of commas in a series; they may come to the conclusion that they need to slow their reading speed when dealing with introductory phrases and clauses; or they may find that, in order to make sense of a sentence, they need to pay careful attention to essential/non-essential elements. Since the show-off exercises are not tests, students can use them to informally assess their skill levels, develop a sense of self-efficacy for mastery of a particular sentence structure, and make sometimes unconscious judgments regarding how much effort they will need to put into mastering the concept under consideration.

VISUALIZING THE GOAL: USING EXEMPLARS AND FOLLOWING A CHECKLIST

Being up-front with requirements is only fair, and my students have consistently named the availability of exemplary papers as one of the most helpful tools for successfully achieving an assignment’s learning outcomes. A model of an attainable goal can be very motivating, especially when the instructor takes the time to point out – or allows the students the time to discover – how an exemplar meets an assignment’s requirements. Exemplars are particularly effective when coupled with a clearly written grading checklist, another item my students repeatedly praise. A checklist detailing

a writing project's outcomes, the characteristic of each outcome, and the possible points awarded to each successful outcome has proved to be helpful to students. When students receive a checklist before they begin their drafts, they have the opportunity to take ownership of their writing's content and to assess their progress toward the required writing outcomes at the same time.

REFLECTING BEFORE CONSULTING: SELF-ASSESSMENT PRIOR TO PEER RESPONSE

English composition classes, Basic Writing included, often incorporate peer-response sessions, during which students respond to each other's drafts. My students frequently mention the value of such sessions, particularly if the pair or peer group stays on task. Nevertheless, to encourage more active and reflective participation, before such sessions begin, each writer completes the first two items on the "Peer Consultation Notes" form: "The point I originally wanted to make in this piece of writing," and "My thoughts and concerns about this writing BEFORE I consulted with a fellow writer." Item 1 is often the thesis statement, which is, of course, the writer's communication goal. Item 2, requiring some thought, is the writer's own direct assessment of the effectiveness of the draft. Immediately after the peer response session, students complete item 3, "My notes about my classmates' reaction to my writing." Item 4, "How I changed this piece of writing after our consultation," is completed before students submit their final drafts. These last two items encourage writers to work toward their goals, combining or contrasting their self-assessments with the apparent needs of the peer audience in order to achieve the goal of proving the points stated in their theses.

REFLECTING ON A MANUSCRIPT: SELF-ASSESSMENT OF A COMPLETED ESSAY

In addition to the Writer's Peer Consultation Notes, my students must complete an in-class seven-item reflection, which they include

in the packet that accompanies their final drafts. The first two items concern the motivation and the goals for the essay: “Why I chose this topic” and “The point I wanted to make in this essay.” The next three are direct self-assessments of the draft and of the student’s learning process: “The strengths of this essay,” “What I learned about my writing process,” and “I feel that I still need to work on this area.” The final two items may be considered indirect self-assessments, for they are the writer’s indication of areas in which he or she needed help and/or may still be struggling: “Acknowledgements” (thanks to those who helped the writer, with specific reference to how they assisted) and “My additional comments and/or questions I would like to ask a reader.” Although submitted on a form, several of the items in this “reflection” are not dissimilar to a book or article preface, created by professional authors just before they turn in their final manuscripts.

CONFERENCING: LOOKING BACK TO SET GOALS AND PLAN STRATEGIES

Although writing instructors often feel that the grades, comments, and/or advice they write on student papers are clear and informative, it has been my experience that students usually require some assistance interpreting teachers’ marginal comments, so conferencing with students individually is invaluable. During early-in-the-term conferences, students and teacher can discuss student achievement in terms of learning outcomes, such as focus, development, organization, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics. Then they can collaborate on setting goals in specific areas of concern and discuss the behavior needed to reach the goals within a reasonable time frame. For example, a student’s goal may be “Eliminate all fragments from my essays by mid term,” and the steps to reach the goal may include “Read my drafts aloud to myself and to the writing consultant from the last sentence in the essay, listening for fragments.” Such goal-setting may take the form of a simple chart with sections for the goal, deadline, and strategies; or the goal-setting exercise may be as elaborate as a formal essay detailing a student’s

writing goal plan, complete with dates, scheduled writing consulting appointments, acceptable number of errors, etc.

CONSISTENT SCAFFOLDING: CONTINUAL GOAL SETTING AND STRATEGY PLANNING

Vygotsky (1962) emphasized the need for teachers to patiently assist and cooperate with students as they learn new skills; this principle applies to the planful actions of self-assessment and goal-setting as well. Developmental students often require quite a bit of “assisted performance” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), and it is a matter of record that students often fail to use appropriate strategies consistently (Henderson & Cunningham, 1994); therefore, if goal-setting is to have a permanent effect on educational progress, it should become a regular feature of the teaching methodology (Lee & Gavine, 2003). Fortunately, drawing students’ attention to their learning processes and to the relationship between their achievement, their writing goals, and their behavior need not become a burden. For instance, after they are given a reasonable time to look over a graded paper, students may be asked to respond quickly on a note card to one or more of the following questions, or to other questions a teacher may design to help students seriously consider what they will “do with” their graded papers:

- My most frequent error(s) seems to be _____.
- Points I will keep in mind for future writing.
- When writing my next assignment, I will _____.
- Questions I have for the instructor

Another “quick-reminder activity” is to ask students to look over their most recent graded essay, reflecting silently upon their writing process and upon the paper’s successes and weaknesses. Students then jot down a brief list of the “strategies I used to write this assignment” and a list of the “strategies I will use for my next writing assignment,” with an emphasis upon what they will do differently. Typical plans may include “Go to the writing consultant. Take my time and don’t try to rush, ‘cause if you rush, there’s always something wrong with the paper.” “I will write about something a little less BORING! I

also will see a writing consultant before I start writing.” “I will use better punctuation and go over my papers better to make sure my sentences don’t have missing words and are more complete” – all good intentions. However, it is essential for the writers to follow their own advice, and they need some support. To provide this support, an effective teacher will hold brief, regular conferences to help students internalize the reality that successful college students reach their goals by following through with their thoughtful plans.

SUMMARIZING ACHIEVEMENT: THE WRITING-ASSESSMENT BUSINESS LETTER

Teachers who use portfolios often require students to write an essay or a cover letter reflecting on their progress as writers, and such assignments are effective even when the course does not include a portfolio. Fortunately for those who do this formal assessment in letter form, electronic templates within word processing programs have added an element of play. Since business letters can be relatively formulaic, it does not hurt to dictate the general contents of each paragraph, perhaps suggesting that the first paragraph be an overview of a student’s adjustment to college or growth as a writer, the second paragraph summarize specific areas of writing improvement (process and/or product), and the third paragraph recount a highlight of the semester and articulate goals/plans for further developing as a writer. Couching the final reflection/self-assessment and goal setting in a fun-to-write, neat-and-tidy business letter package can give students a sense of accomplishment/closure coupled with awareness that the next term is both a continuation of their learning and a fresh start.

LEAVING A LEGACY: A REFLECTIVE MEMO

The last day of the term should be a significant one, and creating a “legacy memo,” written to future writing students, can give current students one last opportunity to assess their achievements and strategies – and to take on the roles of “experts” as they connect with the students who soon will be joining the community of

college writers. This how-to-succeed-in-Basic-Writing assignment can be completed individually, in small groups, or as a class. The memo format lends itself to listing items of advice to next term's class. Although the list is somewhat like a confessional and a celebration – a practical compilation of “what I should have done” and “what worked for me” – this valuable assignment requires students to consider their writing and learning processes, to assess their achievement one more time, and to verbalize their strategies for a genuine audience – first-year students. With student permission, particularly pointed memos might be reproduced on various colors of paper and passed around the class during the first week of the next term, thus completing the cycle and once again emphasizing – from the beginning of the term – the significance of reflection, the importance of personal responsibility, and the authority of student writers.

DEVELOPING A MOTIVATING MINDSET

Many first-year students approach college with uncertainty, but the first day of Basic Writing class can be structured to help students realize that they are already experts who understand the tremendous effort it takes to succeed, whether in music, sports, hobbies, interpersonal relations, household management, or professional areas. Their new challenge is to think and act more like experienced writers. To help students come to know the sometimes hard-won joy of writing, perceptive instructors should encourage them to draw upon their past successes, to apply their self-assessment skills to the writing process, to set suitable writing goals, and to follow through with appropriate strategies. The process is an ongoing one; therefore, self-assessment and goal setting must be integral elements of the course – not occasional assignments, but vital aspects of Basic Writers' development, present every time they write. Ideally, these processes will become fundamental to our students' personal development as well – important features of a scholarly mindset, a mindset that constantly questions, probes, and challenges students to shape, to reach for, and to grasp their goals.

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