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## TEACHING COLLEGE WRITING USING LEARNER GENERATED MATERIALS AND SELF REVIEW

By Erin Ann Thomas

**B**efore I taught my first freshman composition class at Northern Virginia Community College, I had nine years of teaching ESL under my belt. In many of these experiences, my students came from low levels of education in their native language and consequently hadn't developed their critical thinking skills. Traditional methods of instruction weren't an option—helping a thirty year old man with a primary school background write an essay in English required an innovative battle plan. After two weeks of teaching at NVCC, I realized that my students would benefit from the techniques I used with my ESL students. Many of them were from second language backgrounds, many others were from the inner city, and all of them struggled with writing at a very basic level.

I felt that my job as a freshman composition teacher was to equip my students with the writing skills to be successful in their future education and occupation, which required that they become independent writers and self correctors. After my students walked out of my classroom at the end of the semester, I realized that they might never have the writing process broken

down for them again. I wanted them to leave with an explicit understanding of the structure of an essay and the composition and editing process that would allow them to arrive at a successful finished product. It was immediately apparent that developing these skills in my students would require more than assigning essays and lecturing. Two methods I use in my classroom to bridge the gap between traditional writing instruction and my student's composition abilities are using learner generated materials, a technique borrowed from my years in ESL, and the process of self review, a technique used as a supplement to peer review.

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## **Theoretical Background:**

The idea of process based writing has been in vogue since the seventies (Hillock 162) in which students compose essays in drafts and are able to reflect on past weaknesses and strengths. The teacher's role in facilitating this reflection is often referred to as "error correction." In ESL, the effectiveness of this role has been under debate because teachers tend to focus on surface level errors, and students are only able to focus on a limited numbers of corrections at a time (Thomas et. al 91). My colleagues often complain that students don't even read the comments they spend hours writing on their papers or respond to these comments in revisions. Maria Treglia, in a study conducted on teacher-written commentary in college composition classes, asserts that some of this has to do with the quality of teacher commentary, which often consists of "vague directives"(Sommers qtd. in Treglia 67), and that more specific advice is more effective. Additionally, students are reluctant to take on challenging revisions that require clarification in argument or more research (Treglia 82). Paramount in students' ability to progress in their writing ability and remedy their errors is the concept of "noticing," which mediates between input and actual learning (Cross). Using learner generated materials and self review are parts of my instructional strategy, focused on engaging my students in process based writing that attempts to address the above mentioned issues.

## **Learner Generated Materials:**

Using learner generated materials (LGM) is a cutting edge technique in ESL that recycles learner language in order to help students be self-reflective. LGM assures that students are instructed with material that is authentic and appropriate to their level. I routinely take samples from my students' essays to create learning tools that focus on particular problem areas. Isolating these particular mistakes allows students to focus on one issue at a time, which provides a greater opportunity for retention. Additionally, working in groups or individually to correct these mistakes requires that students "notice" them, unlike teacher commentary on essays, which is more easily overlooked or ignored. Using LGM during class time instruction also ensures that students engage in revision exercises that are intellectually challenging.

Three learning tools I've created from student essays are worksheets, a PowerPoint presentation, and a workshop. Some of the worksheets consist of ineffective examples and direct students to rewrite them: the repetition, be-verb, and pronoun worksheets. Other worksheets present effective and non-effective approaches and direct students to identify these and explain their answers: the conclusion and introduction worksheets. The following is an example from "Problems with Pronouns:"

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When you have a baby in your stomach for nine months, you get all excited for the baby's arrival, and you get overwhelmed and don't realize what you are really getting yourself into. When teen moms have their baby, they realize that they have a greater responsibility than they would have. They start to realize they have less time to spend with their close friends and less time to party. They also have to go to school, go to work and pick up the baby.

This selection is taken from an essay written by a student and is far more effective in helping students address shifts in number and person because it is authentic and level appropriate. Editing exercises in textbooks are typically written by professional writers, who attempt to imitate mistakes that students make, which result in exercises on mistakes that good writers make, not writers who are struggling with the basics. This selection could also use improvement in terms of organization, repetition, academic language, and research, but focusing on the aspect of pronoun usage allows students to not be overwhelmed and make the correct edits.

At the beginning of the semester, when I pass back my students' first essay on the assigned topic of "The Drinking Age," I present the PowerPoint presentation, "What to Do and What Not to Do: This is the Answer." Organized around the paradigm that good writing is clear, concise, and specific, this PowerPoint presents effective and non-effective samples from this first essay side by side. It features common errors such as repetition, meandering, rambling, making assertions without evidence, and citing incorrectly, and contrasts this with writing that is on topic, supported by research, and correctly cited. At the end, it concludes with the maxim: above all "to thy own self be true," and an example of plagiarism from Wikipedia. This presentation allows students to interpret the markings on their essays, which are according to a key and a rubric that we have already reviewed. They are able to compare the strengths and weaknesses of their own paper with the strengths and weaknesses of other students' papers on the same topic in particular areas. This presentation also clarifies my expectations for successful writing.

The third technique using LGM brings all my other classroom exercises to fruition. I've struggled in my two years teaching at NVCC to identify a teaching strategy to help my students rewrite their papers. Throughout the semester, student papers always improve in quality, indicating that they learn from the mistakes on their previous papers. However, only a fraction of my students take the opportunity to rewrite their past papers for a better grade. This semester I developed the "Revision Workshop" using two essays from a student from a previous semester who understood the principle of revision. I gave students copies of his first submission with the teacher commentary

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and a second submission that demonstrated substantial revision. I required my students to grade each essay according to my rubric. Developed from qualities I noticed in my students' essays, my rubric is divided into 5 areas: overall structure, grammar, research, MLA, and style of language and argument. Specific descriptions for A, B, C, D, and F papers are provided for each area. Students discussed their scores and the justification for arriving at those scores in a group. They then individually answered the following questions on a worksheet:

1. What score did you give the first draft of this paper? Write a paragraph of justification.
2. What score did you give the second draft of this paper? Write a paragraph of justification.
3. What areas had he improved in the second draft? Did he respond to the teacher comments?
4. How could the second draft of Joe's paper be improved? Write down a step by step action plan for the process that he could follow.

The following class period, students brought three copies of an essay they wanted to rewrite. Students read and workshopped these essays in groups of four, commenting on strengths and weaknesses. Each student consequently outlined an action plan for the step by step process they would have to follow to rewrite their essay in keeping with the assertion that "skilled writers approach writing by planning not only what they will say, but also what they will do" (Flowers qtd. in Boersma et. al).

This exercise using LGM led students along the process of revision, allowing each to understand that revision consisted of more than correcting surface level mistakes, but addressing weaknesses in every area the rubric outlines. Students were also able to more clearly understand how I grade their papers and arrive at their scores.

### **Self Review**

As an adjunct who teaches over a full load of classes each semester, my ability to respond to multiple drafts of my students' essays is limited. Self review is my solution to the problem of offering my students additional feedback before they turn in their papers and supports my instructional vision of educating them to be self-correctors. I use this technique side by side with peer review. Although it is always helpful for students to read and review the essays of their classmates, the feedback this process generates is of variable quality depending on the reviewer.

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Additionally, some students enjoy working with their classmates, but other students prefer working alone, so self review caters to different learning styles.

Self review is a form of self evaluation, which is divided into the following categories in a study by Icy Lee: self-editing, self-assessment, and self-inquiry (204). Self evaluation is often incorporated with portfolios, where students are able to see their progress over a semester. Other forms of self evaluation involve check lists. Self review differs from these types of self evaluation in that it is more targeted and specific, focusing only a few aspects of an essay in each review. This allows students to “notice” particular parts of their essays by isolating the number of concepts they focus on at a time.

Five essays are assigned over the course of the semester, and for each essay, students focus on a different set of self review questions, which move from basic principles to the final polishing stages. The aim is that each set of questions will be integrated into students’ natural editing processes, and that students will understand the sorts of questions they should ask themselves at every stage of composing an essay.

In order to overcome students’ reluctance to analyze their essays in ways that require higher order thinking skills, self review is teacher guided. We read the strategies explained in our writing text, *Successful College Writing* by Kathleen T. McWhorter, and then each student responds to a set of questions that helps them evaluate the success of their essay and what steps they could possibly take to make it stronger. This allows students to make connections between the theories of good writing to the practice of good writing. The following selections are the self review questions for the first five paragraph essay, which focus on the building blocks of an essay, and the self review questions for the research paper, which focus on line editing and word-smithing.

### **Self Review Five Paragraph Essay:**

1. **Thesis statement:** Underline your thesis statement. Is it located at the end of your 1st or 2nd paragraph? Is it a statement, not a question? Does it act as an umbrella for all the topics in your essay? Is it stated as an argument, or does it express a point of view? Read it out loud. Is it awkward? *Read pgs. 101-103 McWhorter.*
2. **Topic sentences:** Underline the topic sentences of each of your paragraphs. Do they adequately introduce the information of the paragraph? Do your topic sentences support the thesis statement? Are the topic sentences focused? *Read pgs. 141-144 McWhorter.*

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3. **Paragraphs:** Examine the information contained in your body paragraphs. Does each paragraph focus on one idea (check for rambling and meandering)? If not, number each of the different ideas to help you rewrite. Does each paragraph have specific and detailed evidence? Is the information in your paragraphs ordered logically, or do you skip back and forth between ideas? *Read pgs. 144-150 McWhorter.*

### **Self Review Research Paper:**

1. **Sentences:** Go through and circle your “be” verbs. Are there any you can change to active verbs? Read through your paper out loud. Circle any grammar mistakes you find and any awkward sentences. Try to eliminate any extra words to make your sentences more concise. Read through your paper for sentence variety. Try to alternate between short and long sentences. Make sure that not all of your sentences begin the same way or have the same structure (pg. 181). *Read pgs. 178-189. McWhorter.*
2. **Words:** Do you use academic language? Are there any colloquial or conversational words or expressions that you need to change? Do you avoid using “you” and “I” in the body paragraphs (you may use “I” when recounting a personal experience but not to express a personal opinion). *Read pgs. 184-194 McWhorter.*

The first set of questions focuses on text level concerns, whereas the second focuses on the sentence level. By the time my students have written four essays and are working on their research papers, I have drilled the basic concepts of essay structure into their heads through exercises using LGM, peer review, and teacher commentary. Consequently, the last self review focuses on the questions students need to ask themselves in order to produce a polished final product, so that they are able to rewrite their previous essays and obtain a high grade on their capstone paper.

### **Student Evaluation of using LGM and Self Review**

According to a study conducted by Iona Leki on ESL students in college writing classes, students prefer that composition teachers mark all the grammatical errors (207). Additionally, I find what when my students rewrite their papers without guidance, they tend to revise only the grammatical errors, which only minimally improves the quality of their work. In the beginning of the semester most of my students write C level papers; by the end of the semester most of my students write B to A level research papers, which have improved in every area of my rubric. This demonstrates that students have internalized the attributes of successful writing, understanding that a

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good paper is more than just grammatically correct. What brings about this transformation from C level writers to A level writers? In the absence of a way to measure this quantitatively, I collected surveys from fifty-three of my 111-009 students from fall semester 2009 and spring semester 2010.

The table below categorizes the responses to the following question: There were several techniques that we used in class to help you write better papers: peer review, worksheets and other exercises from students' papers, self review, computer exercises from *The Bedford Handbook*, teacher comments on drafts, teacher conferencing, and the writing center. Which techniques were most helpful to you and why?

Peer Review	Self Review	LGM
29 mentions	14 mentions	11 mentions
Teacher comments	Writing Center	<i>The Bedford Handbook</i>
31 mentions	7 mentions	18 mentions

Teacher comments received the highest number of mentions consistent with the notion that students rely heavily on their instructors for error-correction. In line with Maria Treglia's conclusions, students asserted the usefulness of teacher commentary based upon its specificity: "Teacher's comments on drafts are extremely helpful because they are concise, precise, and accurate." Peer review received the next highest number of mentions, followed by *The Bedford Handbook*, Self Review, LGM, and the Writing Center respectively. Teacher comments, peer review, and self review were most commonly listed as being most helpful.

### Discussion and Conclusion:

Evident from the results of this survey, using LGM and self review should not replace more traditional forms of composition instruction such as peer review, grammar exercises, or teacher commentary, which students deem useful. They should act as a complement, which coincides with their original purpose as a supplement to help students struggling with the basic principles of composition.

Students preferred different techniques, and this may correspond with their different learning styles. The influence of these is evident from some student responses that included justification for preferences. One student wrote: "Anything that was hands on in class helps because I am more of a visual thinker." Another student wrote, "I like working with others, so I always found it helpful to talk to someone, such as in the case of teacher conferencing and the writing center," which contrasted with another student's comment, "I don't like peer review because I like working alone."

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Student responses also served as a validation for the theory behind both using LGM and self review. The following three selections address the value of using LGM in helping students with error correction. “The worksheets were the most helpful for me because the more I did it, the better I got at finding it.” “Examples from other students’ rough and final drafts were helpful in identifying what revisions to make and what to write and what not to write in a paper.” “The worksheets from other students’ papers were most beneficial to me. Seeing problems that other students have made me more aware of my own writing.” The two following selections address the concepts of self inquiry and teacher guidance involved in self review. “Self review was helpful because asking myself questions about my own paper helped me decide what belonged and what didn’t in my paper.” “With Ms. Thomas guiding us through self reviews, I got a lot done.”

Using LGM and self review are two methods of improving composition students’ ability to self-correct through improving their awareness of effective and non-effective elements in their essays. Both of these techniques allow the teacher to guide students through analysis of text, requiring them to use higher order thinking skills necessary to understand writing. In an article on self-assessment Boersma et al. assert, “When students are able to evaluate their own work it helps them reflect on and understand their own strengths and needs, and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning” (24). Accordingly, using LGM and self review are techniques designed to foster students’ critical ability to evaluate their own writing to the final goal of having “an English teacher in their head” (24).

*Erin Ann Thomas worked at the Alexandria campus for two years from 2008-2010, teaching English 111 and 112, ESL, and Creative Nonfiction. Recently she has taken a short absence from education to sharpen her technical writing skills as an editor for IBM, but hopes to return to teaching in 2012. Her article “Teaching College Writing Using Learner Generated Materials and Self Review” is an extension of her presentation at the 2010 New Horizons Conference. She has published poems in Kalliope, Juice, and Lines n’ Stars. Her essays have been published in Order of the Earth and Dialogue. Her first book length work of creative nonfiction, Coal in Our Veins: A Personal Journey, will be published by University of Utah Press in spring 2012.*

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