Self-Regulated Strategy Instruction in Developmental Writing Courses: How to Help Basic Writers Become Independent Writers

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An experimental study shows that integrating instruction in writing strategies with support for self-regulation strategies in basic writing classes results in significant gains in both the quality of student writing and in student motivation.

I did not get confused or say the same things over again because it [the graphic organizer] allowed me to organize my thoughts, ideas, and points. Before, I would know what I wanted to say, but it would always go off into another topic. It was also overwhelming without the graphic organizer because I had so many ideas.

William [emphasis added]

William is a first-year college student who attended a developmental writing class at a state university in the fall of 2012. In this brief journal reflection, he describes the challenges that he faced when putting together an essay for class. It is a journal entry that could have been written by many of the basic writing students in our classes, pointing to the all-too-common situation in which the affective experience of writing—here, being confused or overwhelmed—directly affects the student’s ability to engage in the writing process.

The fact that affective factors for basic writers often present as a lack of control over the writing process is well documented, as shown in these examples (all emphases added):

> The basic writer “is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. He can usually think of little else while he is writing. But he doesn’t know what to do about it.” (Shaughnessy 7)

> Basic writing students are “pressed by their language-learning faculties to increase the degree of predictability and efficiency in their use of language. This is less a choice they make than an urge they have to move across the territory of language as if they had a map and not as if they were being forced to make their way across a mine field.” (Shaughnessy 10)

> Students are “not so much trapped in a private language as […] shut out from one of the privileged languages of private life, a language [they are] aware of but cannot control.” (Bartholomae 609)
“The problem with [basic writers’] thinking isn’t that they aren’t thinking at the highest levels but that they have trouble controlling their thinking in constructive ways.” (Smith 671)

These authors identify the tension that many basic writers feel between having a lack of control over their work, on the one hand, and being controlled or forced to perform certain tasks that they may not fully understand, on the other hand. This suggests that for the basic writer, then, learning to write is not just a matter of mastering content—what is a thesis statement, how to write a coherent paragraph, and so on—but of mastering the self—how do I manage all the tasks demanded of a writer, even (or especially) when I become “confused” or “overwhelmed”?

Self-regulation instruction is particularly helpful in the teaching of struggling writers. As Cheryl Hogue Smith points out, basic writers see confusion and frustration not as challenges to overcome but as “defect[s] in their capacity to learn” (671). Others write about how basic writers’ negative feelings frequently lead them to give up before they even get a chance to try the lessons taught in class (Blau; Rose; Vacca and Padak). Alice S. Horning calls these affective components “the Filter,” which comprises “all of the learner’s feelings, motivation, and sense of self as they play a role in the learner’s ability to master the material under study” (“Climate” 65). Horning goes so far as to argue that “the affective filter must be down (not operating) in order for students to acquire writing skills” (Teaching 5). In a way, then, the challenge for teachers of basic writing is this: how do we enable our students to see “the filter” not as a personal deficiency but as an obstacle to overcome? How do we help them understand that they are capable of managing their feelings of being “overwhelmed” or “confused,” that they are in control of what they do in the process of writing, so that they can make real progress in the writing classroom?

The class that William took at the state university was part of a study that evaluated a curriculum that is doing just this, supporting students’ writing and self-regulation strategies to cultivate independence as writers (MacArthur and Philippakos; “College Developmental”). The curriculum, Supporting Strategic Writers (SSW), is based on an instructional approach called self-regulated strategy instruction. The curriculum has resulted in significant improvements in the quality and length of student writing, and in the motivational components of writing self-efficacy and mastery learning goals. Because proficient writing is a recursive, complex process that demands constant reassessment of ideas and progress, teaching the writing process alone is, for most basic writers, inadequate. In showing students how to regulate themselves and manage their “filters,” while showing them how to write, the Supporting Strategic Writers curriculum works.

In this article, we summarize evidence from an experimental study about the positive effects of the SSW curriculum on the quality of student writing and on motivation. Then, based on theory and our experience using the curriculum for several years, we explain why and how the instructional approach works. Briefly, it works, first, because it offers struggling students a systematic integration of genres and the writing process, which makes easy the transfer of strategies to new writing situations. Second, it works because it uses think-aloud modeling, which makes
visible to basic writers how independent writers use strategies to cope with challenges when they arise. And third, the curriculum is effective because strategies for academic success—setting goals, managing tasks, monitoring progress, and reflection—are integrated with writing instruction, which helps students learn how to learn. Together, these all build students’ sense of control over writing, which leads to improvement in their writing skills.

Experimental Study

The strategy instruction that is at the heart of the SSW curriculum is based on thirty years of research on strategy instruction in reading, writing, and math (for a review, see MacArthur). In writing, self-regulated strategy instruction and, in particular, the Self-Regulated Strategy Development model of Karen R. Harris and Steve Graham has been studied extensively with struggling and average writers at the elementary and secondary levels. Two meta-analytic reviews have found large effects on writing quality (Graham et al.; Graham and Perin). Recently, research on self-regulated strategy instruction has been extended to older students. In a study by Charles A. MacArthur and Leah Lembo, adult basic education learners in GED programs learned a strategy for writing argumentative essays and significantly improved the quality of their writing. Working with a similar group of adults preparing for the GED, Ann Bassett Berry and Linda H. Mason found improvements in quality of argumentative writing due to strategy instruction. In a brief experiment, Yi Song and Ralph P. Ferretti found positive effects on the argumentative writing of college students following instruction in a revising strategy. However, to our knowledge, our research is the first semester-long study of self-regulated strategy instruction with college learners.

Development and evaluation of this curriculum was part of a research project funded by the Institute of Educational Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. The project devoted two years to design research with three cycles of iterative curriculum development, implementation, and revision based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of data collected from students and teachers. The participants were developmental college students and their instructors, and feedback from both led to curriculum revisions and the collection of data that showed evidence of promise. The results of these design studies showed large gains in the quality of student writing from the start of the course to the end of the course, as well as substantial gains in motivational factors like self-efficacy, affect, goals, and beliefs about writing (MacArthur and Philippakos, “Developmental”).

In fall 2012, an experimental study was conducted that tested the curriculum’s effectiveness compared to a control group (MacArthur and Philippakos,
This study involved thirteen instructors and nineteen classes with 276 students in two universities. Six instructors taught the experimental curriculum (treatment group) while seven continued with their usual instruction (control group). The results indicated that students who were in the treatment group produced higher-quality essays than students in the control group. The difference was not only statistically significant but also substantively large and educationally meaningful. The average of the treatment group was at about the 90th percentile of the control group. Overall, the gains from pretest essays to posttest essays on the 7-point quality scale were 1.0 for the control group and 2.5 for the treatment group. The mean gain scores for all class sections in the treatment group were higher than for all class sections in the control group, except for one tie (i.e., one treatment and one control class had mean gains of 1.7). At the individual level, in the control group, 19% of students made no gain; 63% gained at least 1.0; 20% gained at least 2.0; and 3% gained at least 3.0. In the treatment group, only one student made no gain; 98% gained at least 1.0; 76% gained at least 2.0; and 37% gained at least 3.0.

The treatment students also made larger gains in motivation, with significant differences in mastery goals and self-efficacy. Mastery goals focus on the development of competence and predict intrinsic motivation (Senko, Hulleman, and Harackiewicz). Self-efficacy refers to individuals' confidence in their ability to complete tasks successfully (Pajares). Students usually avoid tasks that they believe they cannot perform well. Treatment students would set goals to use strategies that would help them improve as writers, and they were confident in their belief that they could complete writing tasks (e.g., write the introduction to an essay) and use strategies (e.g., revise). Overall, the quality and motivation differences between students who received instruction using the treatment curriculum and control students indicate that this is an effective approach that can significantly improve developmental students' writing performance.

**What Is Self-Regulated Strategy Instruction and Why Does It Work?**

Self-regulated strategy instruction is a pedagogical approach to writing that integrates three critical components for teaching writing: strategies that integrate genre knowledge with the writing process, think-aloud modeling, and strategies for self-regulation (Harris and Graham; MacArthur). Unlike most basic writing curricula, which provide writing instruction for planning, drafting, evaluating, and revising, this approach also models the writing process in real-time, and it emphasizes the use of self-regulatory processes, such as goal setting, task management, progress monitoring, and reflection. This combination of strategies for writing and self-regulation is the framework for the SSW curriculum, which provides a comprehensive approach for basic writing courses focused on students who need to develop proficiency at writing brief essays in different genres.

The SSW curriculum's systematic approach to writing is easy for the basic writer to learn; however, it is not simplistic but is taught as a flexible approach meant to be transferred to new writing situations. The writing process—plan, draft, revise,
edit—and the instructional sequence—evaluation of strong and weak examples of a genre, teacher modeling of writing in that genre, teacher-student collaborative writing of the genre, student guided independent writing of the genre—are done in each genre unit, so students get repeated practice of the writing strategies across multiple genres. This systematic approach, then, teaches strategies not as restrictive templates to be followed in a single way, for a particular assignment, but as moves that students can and should make in different rhetorical situations to meet their writing goals.

The SSW curriculum also provides a set of Strategies for Academic Success that includes goal setting, task management, progress monitoring, and reflection. Although programs for teaching study skills and strategies for academic success are common on college campuses (Butler, Elschuk, and Poole; Farmer, Allsopp, and Ferron), generally they are not integrated with particular academic courses. The research on strategy instruction in writing, in particular the Self-Regulated Strategy Development model of Harris and Graham, demonstrates that integrating self-regulation with writing strategies has a strong positive effect on students’ progress in writing beyond the effect of the strategies themselves (for a review, see Graham and Perin). This is because engaging in self-regulation strategies while writing emphasizes the idea that writing is a process through which students choose, monitor, and control their own progress. In this way, they learn not how to write mimetically, but how to navigate the writing process as independent writers and learners.

**Systematic Integration of Genres and the Writing Process**

The first reason that self-regulated strategy instruction works in developmental writing classes is its integration of genre knowledge with the writing process. In essence, the strategies show students how to use knowledge of genre to set goals, generate and organize content, and evaluate and revise their work. The basic idea of genre-based strategies is based on early work by Carol Sue Englert and colleagues. The writing strategies that students learn through this curriculum incorporate writing processes with features of common academic genres, such as narratives, causal explanations, and persuasive essays. Each of the units of instruction begins with a discussion of the purposes and forms of the genre and collaborative evaluation of strong and weak examples. Next, the instructor uses think-aloud modeling to engage in *rhetorical analysis*, with an easy-to-remember mnemonic TAPFOR (topic, audience, purpose, form, organization, requirements). The integration of the writing strategies and genre continues with the instructor *brainstorming*, out loud and in front of the class, and then organizing by using a *graphic organizer*. The graphic organizers, customized for each writing genre, give students a clear organizational format that reflects each genre’s purpose.
In the case of persuasive writing (see Figure 1), the graphic organizer requires students to focus on the controversial issue at hand, to commit to one position in the debate, and to identify an opposing position on the topic. The graphic organizer also leads them to distinguish between reasons and evidence and to select from their brainstormed ideas the most powerful arguments. It provides an overall plan that writers can develop into a more elaborated composition in the drafting stage.

After working through the planning process, the class watches the instructor use think-aloud modeling to draft an essay using the planning materials, working through difficulties, and engaging self-regulatory strategies to produce a genre-specific text. Next, the students collaborate with the teacher to compose another essay in the same genre, with the instructor guiding students as they try out the strategies. Collaborative practice is then followed by guided practice, in which students write their own essays in the same genre, with instructor support as needed. After completing a first draft, students prepare for peer review through collaborative review activities and then engage in peer review and revision.

The integration of genre and writing process continues with evaluation and revision. The instructor models for the students how to use evaluation criteria based on the genre elements (e.g., Did I clearly state my position? Are my reasons clearly connected to that position? Are they supported by concrete evidence?). Through this practice, students better learn the evaluation criteria, the elements of the genre, and how to provide constructive and specific feedback to both themselves and others. Research on the effects of giving feedback to peers in college by Kwangsu Cho and Charles MacArthur and by Kristi Lundstrom and Wendy Baker...
shows that learning evaluation criteria and using them to give feedback to peers leads to improvements in writing independent of any effect of receiving feedback. Students’ motivation and confidence also grow as they gain increasing awareness of their own control over their success.

In watching their instructors, then collaboratively writing with their instructors, and finally writing on their own guided by their instructors, students begin to feel success and a sense of self-efficacy (Zimmerman and Bandura). This self-efficacy increases throughout the semester as students apply the writing strategies of analyzing writing tasks, planning and organizing ideas, drafting using appropriate language, and evaluating for genre-specific features, across multiple genres. They achieve mastery of the writing process through this repeated practice, guided by writing purposes and through a demonstration of flexible application of tools to approach various writing and motivational challenges. Every step of the writing process reinforces their familiarity with both genre and writing processes and provides the instructor with a platform for timely feedback that allows students to develop an independent, recursive writing process.

Further, the writing strategies and instructional approach equip students to tackle a variety of writing scenarios, which builds confidence and independence, while reinforcing how writing and self-regulation strategies transfer across writing situations (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). During the tenth week of the semester, after completing three essays, one student shared the following in a journal entry:

I didn’t think this class was going to help me do anything else in college, but I was wrong. I used the same writing steps to complete an essay for my philosophy class, and it became easy to write.

When genre and the writing process are integrated, writing tasks are meaningful to students because they understand how forms of writing are related to audience and purpose and that these forms are flexible for different writing situations, audiences, and purposes. This understanding is essential for any learning to transfer to writing in other courses and situations. This systematic integration also encourages students to reflect on the strategies they are learning, selecting and modifying them to make them work well for both themselves as individual writers and for the rhetorical situations in which they write.

**Think-Aloud Modeling: Making the Implicit Explicit**

The second reason the SSW curriculum has been effective with basic writers is its use of think-aloud modeling. This process of talking through cognitive and metacognitive activities as one performs them explicitly demonstrates the internal thoughts and practices, as well as the self-regulatory processes, that experienced writers perform in the moments of writing.

Think-aloud modeling is different from using model essays. The curriculum does make use of model essays; each unit begins with discussion of good and weak essays to introduce genre features and evaluation criteria. However, think-aloud modeling demonstrates the process of using the strategies to plan, draft, and revise, with
little-to-no advanced preparation, and in front of the class, in real time. Instructors do not simply talk about what is transcribed on paper, but they also talk about their thoughts in making rhetorical moves, in encountering problems, and in using resources as they compose. This articulation of thought and action exposes both cognitive and metacognitive activities of incorporating genre elements, employing self-awareness, and engaging in self-evaluation. Think-aloud modeling emphasizes Mike Rose’s concept of putting knowledge into action by having the instructor become an open-ended problem solver who can tackle problems and issues inherent to writing.

Observation of others is one of the most fundamental ways in which people learn (Bandura). For example, one would not think of teaching a physical skill, such as learning to juggle or dribbling a basketball, without demonstrating it first. One reason that cognitive tasks like reading, writing, and math problem solving are complex to teach and learn is that the critical cognitive processes are invisible; like a “how-to” YouTube video, think-aloud modeling makes them visible for learners to observe and discuss. For writing, Barry J. Zimmerman and Anastasia Kitsantas have articulated a model of self-regulated learning with phases of observation, emulation, self-control, and self-regulation. Students observe and then emulate the teacher’s strategies with increasing self-control until they internalize their own version of the strategies as a self-regulated understanding.

Writers who have researched modeling in education make a distinction between two kinds of modeling: mastery models, which demonstrate a person proficiently accomplishing something, and coping models, which demonstrate a person encountering difficulties but overcoming them. A consistent finding from research on modeling (Bandura; Zimmerman and Kitsantas) is that coping models are more effective in teaching than mastery models. In other words, people learn more from observing a model who initially has difficulty completing a task but resolves those problems than from a model who carries out a task without any difficulties. A coping model demonstrates the trials and errors of working through the challenges of completing a task. A coping approach has had well-documented success in elementary (Gerde, Bingham, and Wasik; Regan and Berkeley) and adult reading classrooms (Berne; Block and Israel). The importance of coping models is especially important for writing, which is difficult even for experts. Basic writers often think that writing is easy for proficient writers. In think-aloud modeling, students witness the instructor facing problems, adjusting to them, and learning from mistakes and errors, thus “coping” with difficulties as they arise.

All of this transparency and talking, however, puts instructors in a potentially uncomfortable situation as they are charged with allowing students to see and hear how they plan, draft, and revise, warts and all.
how they plan, draft, and revise, warts and all. Whereas instructors, in general, present themselves as experts who are qualified to teach and evaluate student writing, think-aloud modeling expects them to work through the messy process of planning, drafting, self-evaluating, and revising in order to create a polished piece of prose—all in front of the students—and talking about, explaining, their weaknesses and challenges as they arise. However, as instructors give up some control, think-aloud demonstrates to students that the challenges of writing are common and manageable, that writing can be adapted to different writing scenarios, and that they are not alone in thinking that writing is hard.

**What Does Think-aloud Modeling Look Like?**

What does self-regulated strategy instruction using think-aloud modeling look like in a real classroom? In general, the instructor takes a writing task, just like one that the students will soon get, and ideally one that he or she has not previously encountered. For example, our instructors asked students to write an essay similar to NPR’s *This I Believe* series, in which they told a personal story that showed a particular lesson that they learned about themselves. After reviewing the steps of the writing strategy, each instructor proceeded to write the essay, live and in front of the class, as if he or she were a student in the class. This is an important point: think-aloud modeling is done at the level of the student, using language, examples, and challenges that a student might encounter—not at the level of a professor who has many years of writing experience under his or her belt.

Consider the following example of using TAPFOR for task analysis (see Figure 2 for a completed analysis):

Well, the topic of the essay is a story, but this paper must be more specific than that. How will I figure out what kind of story I should tell? Am I stuck already?! I haven’t even begun to write. Okay, think this through . . . where can I figure out what kind of story I should tell? I bet the assignment sheet has more detail on the requirements. [Instructor then refers to assignment sheet.]

![Figure 2. TAPFOR for a narrative essay](image-url)
Here is another example of think-aloud modeling for a particularly challenging part of think-aloud modeling for the instructor—drafting. As this instructor drafted, she referred back to the planning documents, especially the graphic organizer.

**Instructor:** Let’s see, I have my plan, and now I am ready to tackle drafting.

The first thing I usually do when starting out a story is getting down the basics. Generally, I don’t like to write the introduction first . . . because if I can’t think of the “right” thing to say, I’ll get blocked. I prefer to jump right into the story. If I look back at my graphic organizer . . . I remember that my essay is about the effect of the death of my dog on my young family and how he was “like a son” or more importantly “like a brother” to my human girls, so I know it is important to establish background and context.

**Typed [spoken]:** My first “child,” bowser, was 15 years old when he died. [No, I want to clarify this idea] I have two human children, at the time Mandie was 7 and Ava was 4. They grew up with their “brother” and felt a strong connection to our canine companion. [I like these ideas but not the way the sentence sounds. I want to get to some of the points of the story now, but I’ll go back to fill in details later. Let’s see, what points are most important?]

The weekend before election day [I will always remember this fact] was unseasonably warm, mid 60s and sunny. [I’m trying to include sensory detail here] One of our favorite activities as a family is to walk our dog together. We had to take advantage of these beautiful days. We have known for some time that Bowser had cancer, but he has an amazing weekend [I feel myself getting a little emotional here, but I’m doing okay. I want to keep writing about the moment, the central action of the story. I’m going to ignore spelling and grammar in order to get my ideas down.]

During the modeling process, the instructor both types/transcribes and talks at the same time. The many asides function as small windows into her cognitive and meta-cognitive activities: thoughts on content, on process, on challenges. These windows allow the students to see the writing process in a way that they never have before.

**Think-Aloud Benefits**

The benefits of seeing the writing process in action, both through the instructor’s drafting and articulated thoughts, are many. First, note that mechanics in the draft were not addressed—instructors make clear that drafting is about higher-order concerns, like ideas and organization, and in so doing, they free students from the negative affective factors that many associate with spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Second, note that the instructor said things like “I’ll go back to fill in details later,” which addresses the important lesson that the writer does not have to get everything right on a draft—rather, writers employ a recursive process. Third, note that the instructor modeled self-regulation as an important part of writing. In this brief example, she modeled how emotions can impede development, but she persisted and encouraged herself by saying she was doing pretty well. She also referred directly to the strategy to keep herself on track.
Notably, with think-aloud modeling instructors expose the metacognitive, self-regulatory aspects of writing to the emerging writer—What do I do when I get stuck? What if I can’t think of the right word? Oh, I forgot this detail; what do I do with it? By articulating the challenges of writing in person, right in front of the class, and by drawing on knowledge of genre and modeling how to use the strategies, we invite students to participate in thinking about the choices they make and, ultimately, how to self-regulate.

While think-aloud modeling sounds good in theory, instructors may wonder why they would put their struggles with writing on display for their students. Remember, think-aloud modeling emphasizes that writing is a struggle for everyone—even the experts. Several students in the study reflected upon the impact of think-aloud in their journal entries:

One of the difficulties I struggle with in my writing is that I have a hard time elaborating on the topic given. I get stuck with what I’m writing at the second because I want it to sound really good. Watching you write your rough draft really helped because you just kept typing and marked the spots you wanted to go back to. When writing mine, I did the same thing however, I tried to make sure all my spelling and grammar was correct. It’s difficult to just ignore things and type for content first, but I’m trying.

Currently the writing strategy that really has been helping me write my narrative has been writing whatever came to my mind while drafting. Before I used to have writers block because I could [not] come up with the exact word or phrase I want. However, now I write down a basic idea I want to discuss and keep going and come back to it later. This [think-aloud] has really helped with just getting everything I want to talk about in a paper down and not forgotten.

By making explicit the many decisions made in the writing process, we dismantle the complex methodology of addressing a prompt in a rhetorically appropriate way. Stressing internal dialogue, we demonstrate that the metacognitive strategies are essential for critical thinking.

In class watching you organize all your thoughts and ideas first and coming up with a few suggestions for a good hook has helped me realize that making a few different sentences and see how they would fit into the introduction will help me make mine better.

As a writer I face many challenges. The hardest thing for me to overcome is writers block. However, I have not faced that problem during this paper so far. First, I used the graphic organizers to get all of my ideas out. Then, I started drafting. This time around though I just wrote all my ideas out in sentences and got everything out that I wanted to say. By doing that I think it helped me not get writers block. I didn’t try to make it “perfect” because I am starting to realize that’s what revisions are for. I think if I continue to approach drafting this way it may make writing a lot easier for me!
Ultimately, strategy instruction using think-aloud modeling fosters “teachable moments,” fielding genre-specific issues, demonstrating self-regulation, and addressing individual student questions. Most significantly, struggling through writing in front of a class builds confidence in emerging writers who become more accepting of their own struggles and better prepared to employ strategies to overcome challenges in writing.

**Strategies for Academic Success: Taking Control of One’s Own Learning**

As Mina P. Shaughnessy, David Bartholomae, Alice S. Horning, and others have recognized, one of the biggest challenges for basic writers is their lack of confidence about their ability to succeed as writers. In an interview study with community college students in first-year writing courses, Rebecca D. Cox found that 80 percent of students expressed fear of failure about writing and that many of them responded in counterproductive ways such as avoiding assessment by not submitting work, avoiding meeting with the professor or speaking in class, or withdrawing from class altogether. These confidence problems are addressed by self-regulated strategy instruction in several ways. First, as discussed above, the curriculum includes systematic strategies for analyzing the rhetorical demands of tasks, generating and organizing content during planning, and evaluating and revising their work. Second, the think-aloud modeling also helps students build confidence by letting them see the writing process clearly and understand that they are not alone in struggling with writing, that all writers experience these challenges.

The third reason the SSW curriculum works is that a set of specific self-regulation strategies are thoroughly integrated with instruction in the writing strategies. Students need to learn to take control of their own learning by using strategies such as setting clear and manageable goals, making choices about how to achieve those goals, managing their time and effort, monitoring their progress, and reflecting on their work to make the most of their efforts. As students learn to take responsibility for these aspects of performance, they develop an increased sense of control, which supports their growing confidence and motivation as writers.

All of these metacognitive, self-regulation abilities can be developed with instructional support. To organize instruction, the SSW curriculum uses a set of Strategies for Academic Success (SAS), which are posted in the classroom and printed in student books (see Figure 3).

At the start of the course, instructors lead a discussion of strategies and goals, emphasizing that people set goals for themselves and select strategies to achieve them. Students share goals they have worked toward and the strategies they used. They see the important difference between having a vague goal (“I want to exercise more this year”) and having a specific goal that is written down so it can be followed and monitored (“I want to get to the gym three times a week in January”). Students write in their learning journals about their goals for the course and their strengths and weaknesses as writers, and the class discusses these issues in the next session. Then the SAS are introduced, briefly at first.
This general pattern of writing in journals about a topic related to the SAS and then discussing it in the next class continues throughout the semester. Students write about the writing strategies they are learning, whether they are helpful, and how students use them. They write about when and where they work on assignments and how they get help when needed. They reflect on their progress as writers and set new goals for the next assignment. The group discussions are important because students’ attitudes about writing and learning are often deeply ingrained in their sense of themselves as students, so they benefit from seeing their peers’ struggles and insights.

Class discussion about these strategies is often spirited; some of the most spirited ones, for example, happen in discussing the task management and checking progress steps of the SAS. In deploying and reflecting on those strategies, students and the instructor in one class discovered that they all shared two similar challenges—the almost irresistible distractions of people and of technology. Again, in journal assignments and in class discussion, they worked out frustrations and brainstormed ways to deal with these challenges. Students talked about how they tried working in different places, at different times of the day, in smaller or bigger time chunks. They were very creative and collaborative in their efforts to manage their tasks (e.g., “Has anyone discovered the study lounge on the third floor of the library? It’s quiet, but not too quiet . . . ”).

These SAS encourage the students to think about the moves they make in the process of completing a writing assignment. This metacognitive ability to see...
what one is thinking in the writing process is noted by many to “facilitat[e] a shift of responsibility for writing development from the teacher to the student” (Sommers 174), to give the writer the “distance that is essential for craft” (Murray 142), to function as “a sign of growth” from basic writing to effective writing (Parisi 34). Hope Parisi, for example, writes about how her students tend to see improvement in writing as making fewer errors, when “the real strides they in fact may be making—e.g., in planning, focusing, or revision—receive no mention” when they write reflective pieces about their writing (34). To help them see the “real” progress they are making, Parisi encourages her students to represent graphically the moves they make in the course of completing an assignment, an activity that results in highlighting the “supposedly ‘empty moments’ between tasks where they can best find themselves questioning, analyzing, criticizing, shaping new thoughts—all acts of self-investment” (36). The SSW curriculum achieves the same end: since their choices in the writing process are put at the forefront of classwork and discussion, students are able to identify the degree to which they can and do control the writing process—their “self-investment,” in Parisi’s words. Parisi continues by suggesting that “[f]or basic writers, metacognition can mean confidence” (35). The experience of the instructors who tested this curriculum is consistent with her findings: student awareness of the degree of control they have over their writing led to increased confidence in most students, even—often especially—the ones who identified themselves as “bad writers” in initial journals.

**Concluding Thoughts**

By the end of the first few weeks of the course, instructors could already sense a difference between the classroom dynamic in basic writing classes they had taught without self-regulated strategy instruction and the classes taught with the experimental curriculum. Students were recognizing, themselves, that they were going to be in control of their success or failure in this writing course: the beginnings of self-regulation. Consequently, in addition to the learning of writing strategies, instructors identified the students’ will and ability to be in control and work toward their writing independence.

An important aspect of the ownership that the SSW curriculum cultivates is that it helps many students learn how to handle challenges and what they would have otherwise perceived as failure. Seen in the context of an ongoing project, challenges at any particular writing step or assignment stage are recognized not as the end of efforts but as a new starting point where a goal needs to be tweaked, or a new strategy needs to be applied. In the course of all this work, most students found themselves working harder because they knew it mattered for their success in the classroom. This was evident in their reflections that they provided in their writing journals. It was common to get journal passages like this one, for example:

> Once you have your tasks and your plan or strategy set, you will be more likely to stay focused on completing your tasks, and follow your plan. This is because it’s your strategy, and you know what tasks need to be done, and how to do them.
In other words, the students learned not to be discouraged by the hard and time-consum- ing work required of good writing; some were even energized by it! They understood that success related to the application of a strategy that was their own. They had learned about specific writing strategies but they had also developed an ownership and learned how to successfully apply them. There were, of course, exceptions, but even the students who struggled developed a sense of control over their behavior in the writing process that translated into making them better students, and better students will almost always be better writers than weaker ones. Without realizing it, students were acting as independent learners and were taking ownership of their work in powerful ways. This of course led to a confidence that allowed them to feel more in control of the writing they were doing. By the end of the term, students were writing journal entries like this one:

Now that I have a strategy before writing, I feel a lot more confident in my papers, and I am expecting my grade to reflect this new feeling that I have. (emphasis added)

This level of confidence indicates a level of control that so many basic writers do not have. However, with SSW they can develop the confidence to face challenges, complete complicated writing tasks, manage their effort and attention, develop responsibility for their work, and earn a grade that reflects their work.

Authors’ Note

The authors of the Supporting Strategic Writers curriculum have recently received a grant that will allow them to conduct a more rigorous evaluation of the curriculum. The five-year study is being conducted in 2016, 2017, and 2018, with follow-up with students for the successive two years to see how the curriculum affects their success in later courses or degree completion.

Works Cited


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