

Supporting Strategic Writers: An Evidence-Based Approach

Charles A. MacArthur, University of Delaware
Zoi Traga Philippakos, University of Tennessee

Many entering community college students are required to take non-credit developmental courses in reading and/or writing, but only a minority complete these courses and pass a first-year composition course. Active efforts are addressing this problem with structural reforms to placement procedures, integration of reading and writing, and accelerated courses. But little research has focused on pedagogical methods for teaching writing and reading. Since 2010, our research group, with funding from the US Department of Education, has been developing and evaluating instructional approaches for developmental writing and reading based on self-regulated strategy instruction. Research over ten years has consistently found strong effects on writing quality and motivation.

The goals of the Supporting Strategic Writers (SSW) approach are widely shared – that students will develop knowledge of academic writing genres; strategies for critical reading, planning and revising; and the motivational beliefs that support continued critical reading and writing in the future (Rose, 1989; CWPA, 2011). The SSW instructional approach is based on strategy instruction (Harris & Graham, 2009; MacArthur, 2011) integrated with practices common in college composition. Students learn genre-based strategies based on the rhetorical purposes, text structures, and linguistic features of genres. Genre features integrate the strategies for planning and revising, as well as critical reading and note-taking. The strategies provide an initial map for students unsure about how to engage in the writing process. Equally important, students learn metacognitive strategies for goal-setting, task management, progress monitoring, and reflection. Journaling and class discussions engage students in reflecting on how they can take control of their own learning through setting goals, selecting strategies, and monitoring progress. Self-evaluation and reflection on one's progress are critical to developing a growth mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2012) that learning is possible with effort and strategic choices. Pedagogical methods include discussion of model essays, think-aloud modeling of strategies, collaborative writing, peer review and self-evaluation, and reflective journaling.

Research Support

Development stages (2010-13). The design research included three cycles of design, implementation, evaluation, and revision over 2 years (MacArthur & Philippakos, 2012; 2013).

Quasi-experiment (2012). This study involved 2 colleges, 13 instructors, and 276 students (48% minority, 10% non-native English speakers). The SSW curriculum was compared to control classes that received typical instruction for a full semester. SSW had a large effect on quality of

argumentative writing (ES = 1.22). It also had a large effect on self-efficacy (confidence) and a moderate effect on mastery motivation. (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Ianetta, 2015).

Efficacy study (2016-17). A rigorous experimental study was conducted at 2 community colleges with 19 instructors randomly assigned to treatment and control and 207 students (62% female; 57% minority, 12% non-native English speakers). The SSW approach had a very large effect on quality of writing (ES=1.75, i.e., average treatment student was at the 90th percentile of the control group). It also had positive effects on a standardized writing assessment (NAEP) (ES=0.67) and on self-efficacy for writing. (MacArthur, Philippakos, May, & Compello, 2019).

Efficacy study (2018-19). A recent study investigated a version of the curriculum with a focus on writing using sources and, thus, more emphasis on integrating critical reading with writing. At 2 community colleges, 23 instructors were randomly assigned to treatment and control; 243 students participated. The primary outcome measure was an argumentative essay using two source articles. A substantial effect was found on quality of those essays (ES=.58, $p < .01$).

Study of an Accelerated Course (2018-19). This quasi-experimental study evaluated an adapted version of the course that met 4 days a week for 4 weeks at the start of the semester, leaving time for an 11-week credit composition class. Five instructors (2 T, 3 C) and 65 students participated. The SSW approach had a large effect on the quality of argumentative essays with sources (ES = 0.97). The study was the doctoral dissertation of Eric Nefferdorf, one of the instructor-collaborators at the beginning of our research in 2010.

Comments from Student Journals

“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.”

“Without using the strategy, I realized that I would not be able to manage my tasks and check my progress on an assignment. This could cause confusion and allow me to easily give up on what I was trying to achieve... just like it did to me prior to college.”

Contacts and an Invitation

We are interested in collaboration with institutions or individuals who would like to try out our instructional approaches and adapt it to their settings or courses, including developmental writing courses, integrated reading and writing, co-requisite courses, or first-year composition. For more information you can contact us by email:

Charles A. MacArthur, University of Delaware, macarthur@udel.edu
Zoi Traga Philippakos, University of Tennessee, zphilipp@utk.edu

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