

“Bottleneck Behaviors and Student Identities: Helping Novice Writers Develop in the First Year Seminar and Beyond”

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Teaching first-year post-secondary students to write involves significant challenges for professor and student. Key among these challenges is inspiring students to resist procrastination and devote time over multiple sittings to the writing task. The situational factors at our small, private, liberal arts institution in Greenville, South Carolina, USA compound these general difficulties. We recently adopted a new curriculum in which faculty across the disciplines (and with little composition training) teach first-year writing seminars (FYW) to our academically-talented students (whose fixed mindset compels them to resist effort, especially during stuck places in the drafting process) (Dweck, 2006). Previous institutional research revealed that students deployed productive strategies and behaviors at the beginning (pre-writing) and end (revising) of their writing processes. However, strategies and persistence during the middle stages (planning and drafting) were ineffective and improved little during the FYW experience (Kolb et al., 2011). How might we help students develop strategies for dealing with stuck places and keep motivation high during the laborious “middle stages” of writing? Including an assignment checkpoint during the drafting stage, I hypothesized, could heighten students’ awareness of its importance in the process and amplify persistence when confronting writing bottlenecks. This persistence might, in turn, facilitate an identity shift from novice to inchoate expert writer. 13 FYW faculty agreed upon a common intervention with a metacognitive component, the reverse outline (Harris et al., 2010). I interviewed 25 first year students in a pre- and post-test design.

Although fifteen weeks is a short time to make appreciable differences in drafting behaviors, qualitative assessment of pre- and post-intervention interviews revealed that intentional drafting behaviors had increased, even though students did not explicitly mention the reverse outline. Furthermore, adoption of individualized strategies for dealing with stuck places--or “signature bottleneck behaviors”--increased.

In follow-up interviews during the sophomore year, students could more effectively articulate their process *even as* they continued to grapple with their identities as writers. In other words, they were poised on the threshold of writerly identities. These findings align with threshold concepts theory in that this new way of knowing engenders: “...a transfiguration of identity and adoption of an extended or elaborated discourse” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 21). In describing their writing process, second year students used more dynamic language, signaling a shift not only in their writing activities but also in their conceptions of themselves as active agents in the writing process: writing is something you *do*, not something *done to you*. Thus, the study foregrounds the interplay between behaviors and identity; that student identity and dispositions, perhaps more than strategies or behaviors, are key elements in promoting persistence and amplifying student writing efficacy in first year writing courses and beyond.

This essay will have direct applications in classroom practice (sharing the formula developed for the reverse outline and providing suggestions) as well as program and curriculum design (making recommendations for developmentally-appropriate student learning and program assessment goals).

References

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