

Adult ESOL Students Express Their Voices through Process Writing

by Tanya Conover

My School Story by Zargoona

I am very sad. I have five children. I can't read and write to teach my children. When I was little, I cried to my mother and father, "Why not send me to school?" In Afghanistan, they killed a girl going to school. She was my friend. One day the plane bombed the school. The car burned. One day I went to school. The Taliban tazered my friend's face. He came to hit me. I threw my books on the floor. He hit me.



My School Story by Saeko

My country is Japan. When I was a child, my school was there in the beautiful scenery. But, WWII broke out when I was six years old. All of the cities in Japan were lost. My family lived in a mountain cave. The war had come to an end when I was eleven years old. All that survived was the beautiful scenery. We lost everything: schools, teachers, classmates, clothing, socks, books, notebooks, pencils, gloves, socks. I appeal to the world. War is misery.



What do Zargoona and Saeko have in common? They both are beginning level ESOL students who have something to say.

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Teaching Writing

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A Few Words on *Progress*

I don't know many people who are not at least a little intimidated by writing. Every time I sit down to write a letter for *Progress*, I wonder if anyone will read it, and, if someone does, whether he or she will feel that what I have written has any merit. I spend time thinking about phrasing and word choice. Then I go through the revision process where I obsess even more. Having a strong editor like Hillary Major makes my job easier because I know she will catch my mistakes or question my wording. But it also unnerves me to think that someone with Hillary's writing and editing ability and her undergraduate and graduate degrees in writing will be reviewing my work. All of this angst comes from someone with an undergraduate degree in journalism and a 15-year career in public relations and marketing. Before moving into organizational management, I wrote materials such as news releases, newsletters, scripts, and manuals almost every day of my life.

My experiences with writing make me very understanding of our students who struggle to learn to put their ideas into written forms. Those experiences also make me very appreciative of the teachers who help our students learn to write. Adult education teachers and literacy tutors must encourage even the most reticent writers to continue to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, even when their fear of failing to produce an acceptable piece threatens to hold them back. Over the years, I have read many essays, poems, and short stories by adult learners. They have never failed to move me with the power of words newly learned and newly expressed.

This issue of *Progress* is dedicated to the students who are becoming empowered by their own written words and the teachers who guide their writing development. The students who allowed us to publish their works are to be praised for not only sharing their writing but also for letting readers into their lives. There is something of magic in the writing process—a little art, a little science, and a lot of life. Good writing teachers help their students to access that magic for themselves even when writing is a struggle.



Calendar

March

9-10

Data Summit
Roanoke, VA

16-19

TESOL Convention
New Orleans, LA

16-20

Virginia Festival
of the Book

31-April 2

Technology Literacy
Conference at the Beach

April

3-5

National Conference
on Family Literacy
Louisville, KY
www.familit.org

7-8

EL/Civics Symposium
Richmond, VA

17-21

COABE National
Conference
San Francisco, CA
www.ccaecoabe2011.com

May

19

Literacy Fair
Keysville, VA

July

27-29

VAILL: Virginia Institute
of Lifelong Learning
Radford, VA

Teacher Feature

Barbara Hicks

by Hillary Major

Pop hits sound from the computer speakers in a second floor room of the Clarendon Education Center as the adults in Barbara Hicks' 150-level ESOL class arrive. The first few students find seats and immediately begin to work on the cloze exercise that has been written out on the blackboard, several sentences including conversational basics like:

_i th_re! H_w w__y__d__?
Th_ w__th_r w__a lit_le b_t
w_rm t_d_y.

More students arrive, greeting each other with "Good evening." As one student enters the room, Hicks calls out, "How is your toothache?" The student approaches the desk, and Hicks shares information about a low-cost local dentist, including directions on how to call for a referral. Another female student explains that she missed an earlier class because she was sick with a fever. Hicks explains REEP attendance policy, then says with a smile, "I have some medicine for you." She brings out a container of chocolate candies. The other student, sitting at the same round table, jokes: "not good for a toothache."

Hicks moves around the room, checking learners' progress on the cloze exercise. She makes a few corrections on individual papers and, after noticing a phrase the class is having trouble with, fills in a few of the missing letters on the board. Then, she moves to the front of the class: "Hi there! How was your day?" After the group repeats the phrases a few times, Hicks poses the question to individual students. One student replies that his day was "great." To the follow-up question "What did you do?", he shares that he slept, after having worked a night shift.

Hicks turns to the whole class. "When did he sleep? Did he sleep at night?" There are mixed responses, so she repeats, "He worked at night. He slept at day. When did he sleep?" This time, the class is unanimous in replying, "at day."

The next student responds that her day was "fine." She explains that she didn't get to see her husband, who was working. Hicks elicits

the husband's work schedule as a review of time and numbers.

Then Hicks announces, "Stand up!"

"Pay attention to the physical environment and biology. Feed the human need. Have fun whenever possible!"

The students are to find 5 different people to talk to, asking and answering the questions "How was your day?" and "What did you do?" The room is quickly filled with noise as learners pair up.

Afterward, Hicks hands out chalk. Some students fill in the blank spaces from the cloze, while others write out verbs under some drawings of stick figures engaged in different activities. As Hicks goes over the cloze sentences, the class repeats them to practice pronunciation.

Next, Hicks checks students' homework from *Very Easy True Stories*. Then, pulling out the overhead projector and adjusting the lighting, she moves on to introduce the "Emergency!" health literacy picture story (by Kate Singleton). The class discusses the pictures; when Hicks introduces the term "check up," only a few learners indicate that they have ever had one. At the end of the picture story, the cartoon character looks in shock at a bill for his emergency room visit. Hicks adds the term "financial advisor" to the class word wall, drawing another figure in the story's last frame.

After discussing the role of a financial advisor, it is time to get students up on their feet. Hicks distributes a worksheet illustrating directions a doctor might give during a check up (open your mouth; breathe in/out; raise your arm). Hicks dons a doctor's headlamp made from copy paper and begins to elicit the vocabulary from the class, demonstrating the various actions and supplying less familiar words like "bend" and "straighten." This leads into a kind of Simon Says activity, in which the students follow the commands as she calls them out. After a while, Hicks declares, "Class,

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Research-based Writing Instruction

by the staff of the TEAL (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy) Center / reprinted by permission

Recent national research has gathered what we know about effective practices for teaching writing to adolescents.

This fact sheet examines the research on writing instruction for youth and adults, with attention to those who struggle to learn. Extrapolating from these major analyses provides guidance for adult educators to boost their writing instruction for adult learners.

About Writing Instruction

Recent national research has gathered what we know about effective practices to teach writing. *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007), and a companion analysis, *What We Know, What We Still Need to Know* (Graham & Perin, 2007), examine the research on writing instruction in grades 4-12, with attention given to those whose writing skills need improvement. *Writing to Read* (Graham & Hebert, 2010), analyzes the research on how writing instruction and practice can improve reading skills. Although these studies focus on students younger than most of the adult education population, they provide direction for instruction with adults. This fact sheet provides a thumbnail sketch of these three major studies and the implications for adult educators and learners.

Elements of Writing

Writing is multifaceted and includes a number of skills that must work together. Evaluating writing can be subjective when instructors and learners alike are unsure of what makes "good" writing. Writing "quality" is defined in *Writing Next* as "coherently organized essays containing well developed and pertinent ideas, supporting examples, and appropriate detail" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 14). Sentence structure and vocabulary are other key elements that contribute to the quality of a piece of writing. Learners who find writing difficult may experience challenges in any of these areas as well as in spelling, handwriting, prior knowledge of the topic, and familiarity with models of academic literacies or genres. Because writing is such a complex act, high quality writing depends on this large constellation of skills and abilities. The goal of writing instruction is to help writers become flexible and proficient, able to adapt to various purposes, contexts, and formats, and, in so doing, to synergize literacy development in both writing and reading.

Why Teach Writing to Adult Learners?

Adults encounter writing tasks on a daily basis, especially informational or expository writing such as notes to children's teachers, grocery lists, work activity logs and forms, emails to family and co-workers, online service forms, and so on. The pervasiveness of writing in daily life underscores the need for learners and their instructors to focus on helping adults become flexible, confident writers.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that many adults of all ages in America are not flexible, confident writers. *Writing Next* and *Writing to Read* provide grim statistics showing that poor in-school performance and high drop-out rates from high school lead to a situation in which adults



Preparing adult students for further education or work advancement requires that adult educators help learners improve their writing skills and increase their confidence in their ability to write.

are underprepared for postsecondary education or successful employment. For example, they report that nearly a quarter of community college registrants show the need for developmental writing instruction. Similarly, the reports document that the writing demands of most jobs—even at the entry level—are increasing and businesses may have to provide the remedial writing instruction that workers need. Preparing adult students for further education or work advancement requires that adult educators help learners improve their writing skills and increase their confidence in their ability to write.

What's the Research?

Writing Next and *Writing to Read* are meta-analyses, that is, large-scale statistical reviews of studies that compare treatment and control groups. A meta-analysis allows researchers to combine multiple studies of a single instructional intervention and report “effect sizes” as an effectiveness measure. An effect size tells whether statistically significant findings are also educationally meaningful. *Writing Next* analyzed 142 studies and *Writing to Read* analyzed 93 studies. *What We Know* extends the conclusions of *Writing Next* by reviewing articles that did not fit the strict inclusion criteria, including 48 single subject studies of writing, many of which were focused on students who had learning disabilities or were otherwise low achieving. Because there is very little rigorous research on the effectiveness of literacy interventions for adult learners, it is necessary to refer to studies with younger students. The challenge for the adult education community is to extrapolate from reports on younger students and apply these findings in instructional design for adults. We already know, for example, that many native English speaking adult learners were low-achieving students in K-12 and many have undiagnosed learning disabilities (Corley &

Taymans, 2002; National Institute for Literacy, 2009). We also know from adult learning theory that adults show different learning patterns and levels of motivation from adolescents and younger children, and it is necessary to take these differences into account when drawing from work with younger populations to plan for instruction with adults. There are also some studies of writing development in adults and youth in postsecondary settings that fill in some of the gaps and help us develop approaches to helping adults improve their writing abilities.

Recommended Instructional Strategies

All three reports find that writing instruction should emphasize explicit, direct, and systematic instruction with many opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful, extended writing. Learners who wish to improve their writing skills will benefit from learning strategies, and from assistance given by peers, mentors, and technology tools.

Writing Next, *What We Know*, and *Writing to Read* found the following instructional interventions to be effective. Those that are especially helpful for low-achieving writers are noted. This TEAL Center Fact Sheet offers in *italics* suggestions for contextualizing instruction in the adult education setting.

- **Strategy instruction**, especially self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), and summarization, described below, are the most effective approaches identified in these reports. Writers who are explicitly taught strategies that are reinforced in class over time can internalize these strategies and draw on them for support when writing. Strategies replace negative self-talk with positive self-instructions to help students overcome frustration and past failure. *Strategy instruction has been introduced to adult education through the professional development programs, Bridges to Practice and Learning to Achieve, developed by the National Institute for Literacy to address the needs of students with learning disabilities. It is an instructional approach that requires professional development and practice leading to instruction that is consistent and explicit.*

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Research-based Writing Instruction (continued from page 5)

- **Summarization.** Explicit teaching of the elements of a summary of a text leads to improved ability and increased confidence in writing summaries. Having learners write summaries about what they read is a key recommendation from *Writing to Read*. In addition, summarization is an increasingly common expectation as students advance in their education and are assigned more complex texts to read and comprehend. *Connect this instruction and practice with increasingly complex texts to reinforce learners' comprehension as well as writing skills.*
- **Setting specific product goals.** Understanding the nature of goals for a written product, setting the goal in advance during planning, and then monitoring and editing one's work for adherence to the goal all result in higher quality final products. Setting specific goals (e.g., "to persuade a voter") are more effective than general goals (e.g., "write a 200-word essay"). *Discuss writing quality with learners and identify areas for improvement. Help learners set explicit goals to guide their writing, and work with them to track progress. For example, learners may want to write more words during a Quick or Free Write exercise, others may identify that their sentences are all of a similar type and want to focus on adding variety and using combined sentences. Tracking goals works!*
- **Word processing** and other technology tools are especially supportive for struggling writers, providing the means to move more easily from idea to composition, supporting spelling, revising, and proofreading. Technology-assisted writing also makes collaborative writing (see above) more feasible and productive.
- **Sentence combining**, that is, practicing how to combine two simple sentences into a compound or complex sentence, has a positive impact on overall writing quality and can boost learners' reading comprehension skills as well. *Use this technique in conjunction with other effective writing techniques, such*
- **Collaborative writing.** Making arrangements for students to work together through the entire process of writing—planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—results in higher quality writing products. *Use technology to support and share writing, especially for classes that do not meet daily, or assign writing as an out-of-class activity.*



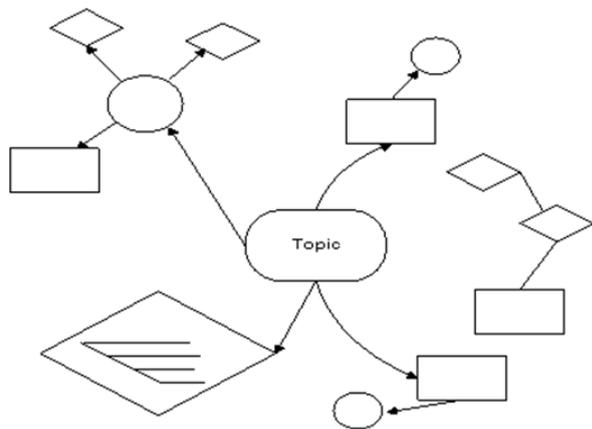
About TEAL

The [Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy \(TEAL\) Center](#) is a project of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), designed to improve the quality of teaching in adult education in the content areas. TEAL offers an intensive program of professional development and individualized technical assistance to working groups from participating states. Virginia is one of twelve states selected to be a part of the first, two-year TEAL initiative, which focuses on writing instruction for ABE students.

TEAL teachers Susan Moore-Parkhurst and Kristin Hott are featured in this issue of *Progress*. They are joined on Virginia's team by Michelle Nicolai and Sherre Christiansen, along with state coordinators Hillary Major and James André. The TEAL participants are currently engaged in a series of online courses and discussions with teachers and administrators from across the country, which will be followed by a summer planning institute. The TEAL initiative runs through 2012; the second year will focus on piloting instructional materials and approaches.

as encouraging peer discussion as part of collaborative writing; this will help reinforce the practice.

- **Prewriting activities**, or brainstorming before beginning to draft a composition, has a positive impact on the final written product. Prewriting activities can be done individually or as a collaborative process. This planning



strategy may be particularly important to low-achieving writers for compensating and overcoming documented weak prior knowledge and vocabulary (Graham & Perin, 2007). *Engaging learners and supporting vocabulary development and background knowledge through pre-reading strategies can support writing about the topic, too. Generate lists, word webs, and personal glossaries that can help writers demonstrate what they know.*

- **Inquiry**, in which learners engage in a focused investigation with “immediate and concrete data” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 19) that they gather and analyze, is a springboard to higher quality writing. *Assign authentic activities and materials as inquiry writing, either inquiry in the community (i.e., is there consensus for the public library to expand?) and/or online as a web quest.*
- **Process writing approach** includes many related activities, including a greatly increased quantity of writing (only some of which is completed to publication) and a focus on writing throughout the course, along with mini-lessons on embedded skills. It is a professional development model as well, and results seen in students’ writing are correlated to teachers’ training in the approach. It is worth noting that the instructional activities of sentence combining and inquiry are part

of the approach. Another key component is the modeling of writing by instructors. *Model writing and responding to feedback and model applying the strategies you teach. Many adult educators have participated in local National Writing Project chapters; see www.nwp.org for a chapter near you that can offer professional development and a community of writers.*

- **Study of written models with direct, guided practice** was found to be an effective instructional strategy, especially for students with low skills. Many adult education students are not familiar with different types of written genres; the explicit study of formats, styles, tones, vocabularies, sentence structures, etc., can provide new frames and words for their own work.

A cautionary note about **grammar instruction** emerges from the meta-analyses: Studies of grammar instruction alone or as a primary writing instructional approach produced **negative results** on students’ overall writing quality. However, the authors argue that it is important to teach grammar. It seems most helpful to the learner to use grammar approaches that involve active learning (such as sentence-combination) and are integrated with other writing activities. ■

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“Let’s Talk About Writing”

Email as a Platform for Student Self-Assessment and Developing a Writing Practice

by Kristin Hott

Editor’s Note: In the following interview, GED instructor Kristin Hott (KH) interviews a former student, Franklin Lewis (FL), with whom she has kept in touch via email. Franklin speaks about his experience as an adult learner and the role of writing in his life.

KRISTIN (KH): Hello. My name is Kristin Hott. I’m an adult educator in Richmond, VA, and this is a student of mine for the past few years; his name is Franklin Lewis. Franklin, would you like to introduce yourself at all?

FRANKLIN (FL): Hello. My name is Franklin Lewis. I’m 39, and I’ve been going for my GED for a quite a while now. I’ve made big strides, as far as getting my GED. Also, I’m 90 points away from graduating, which will be a big, big success for me. *(laughter)*

KH: That’s a great place to start, to talk about what preparing for the GED has done for you, in terms of your writing, your reading, and how this journey that you’ve been on has had an impact on your everyday life.

FL: My writing has improved, twofold, I guess I could say. I went from someone who really didn’t like to read or write, and also I didn’t write all that well, but with practice, a lot of practice, and help from a lot of friends and teachers, I have improved quite a bit.

KH: What about your writing is better, or what has become “good” about your writing? Can you name one specific thing?

FL: Well, my spelling definitely has improved. I’ve never been a good speller anyway, but by taking my GED tests and taking classes, it has improved quite a bit.

KH: Can you name a specific thing that’s changed

that you feel better about, or is one of the ways you know it’s improved?

FL: I also write better, and what I mean by that is, I couldn’t write as well as I do, before I met you.

“My writing has improved, twofold ... I went from someone who really didn’t like to read or write ... but with practice ... I have improved quite a bit.”

KH: I did not pay Franklin any money to say that! *(laughter)*

FL: Actually, you gave me the extra push, when I wanted to just give up and quit.

KH: Were you writing at all before we were in class? Did you ever sit down to write a story or a journal or notes to yourself?

FL: I never did any journals. The only thing I would write was a to-do list, that’s about it. I would write some, but not to any long extent.

KH: And you wrote letters, some letters, or not really at all?

FL: No, not too many, no.

KH: How much do you see yourself writing now? I mean, on a daily basis, do you use writing every day?

FL: I try to write at least three to four times a week, just either little notes to myself or emailing friends and family or writing letters to friends.

KH: And did you get any feedback from people about how your writing had changed when you were emailing or writing letters?

FL: I had a friend of mine I’ve been knowing for almost fifteen years, actually he used to live here in Richmond, but he moved back to Connecticut

... He did send me an email saying, "you know what, your writing has definitely improved a lot," in the past years he's known me.

KH: And that was through emailing and writing him?

FL: Yes, through emailing and writing, just keeping in touch, seeing how things were going, and how his life had been, stuff like that.

KH: And so some form of regular communication was a reason you had to improve your writing; you wanted to make sure that he could understand you.

FL: Yes.

KH: Did you think that email would be one of the ways that would help you improve your writing, sending emails to someone? Did you connect that to writing, and improving writing in an academic sense; that it would be a way to help improve it?

FL: Well, actually, I didn't at first, until after I received the email from my friend. I didn't even think that would impact it at all.

KH: How did that make you feel?

FL: It made me feel good, though. I felt really well, I mean, really good ... Coming from a friend of mine who I'd been knowing that long period of time, actually taking the time and telling me I had improved, it meant a lot.

KH: When you send email now, do you feel more confident?

"A friend ... actually taking the time and telling me I had improved ... meant a lot."

FL: I always critique it two or three times before I send it ... *(laughter)* Yeah, because I'm the type of person, well, I like things to be perfect and I overdo it sometimes.

KH: What kinds of things are you looking for in your email? I know you send email to me, and I've made some comments. When you say that you critique it two or three times, what kinds of things are you looking for?

FL: Spelling! Making sure all things are punctuated correctly, capital letters are in the right places, commas are in the right places.

KH: Do you run through the rules in your mind? Coordinating conjunctions, etc.? *(laughter)*

FL: Yes, I try not to leave out anything that shouldn't be left out. I make sure all the verbs, and stuff, are intact. *(laughter)*

KH: Do you have a mental checklist or do you have an actual physical checklist next to you when you're editing your writing?

FL: Sometimes I do a little of both.

KH: Do you ever ask anyone else to read something; if it's not just an email, but some kind of document, do you ever ask a friend to look it over?

FL: Yes, I usually try to do that because even though it sounds good to me, if someone else was to read it, they will probably catch something that I probably would miss. It's always good to have someone critique your writing. Sometimes, you know, people don't like to hear "well, this is not right, or that's not right," but we don't know if it's right or not if we don't get someone to actually take the time to read it for you.

KH: So you take feedback well; you take *constructive* criticism well.

FL: Yes, oh yes, you have to. I mean, how can you improve if you don't? You have to take the good with the bad, I should say. That's something that we all could work on and learn to do better.

Continued on page 11...



Teaching **Workforce** WRITING *in a* **Readiness Class**

by Susan Moore-Parkhurst

“I cannot spell to save my life!”

“I don’t know how to put this into words...”

“I don’t have any skills, so how can I describe them?”

After having taught career education classes for five years, I recognize these “complaints” for what they really are: adult students expressing anxiety when confronted with a writing task. From my experience, there are three major factors that contribute to this fear of writing. First, most adults in workforce classes haven’t been in a classroom for over thirty years; second, they may have had negative classroom experiences; and third, their confidence levels usually are extremely low due to continued layoffs and a weak job market. Combine this set of challenges with a fourth: many students in our workforce classes have little or no experience in how to operate and utilize a computer.

New River Community College’s Adult Education Program has seen an increase in demand for its workforce readiness courses over the past several years as companies have begun closing or laying off workers in large numbers. Workforce teachers face an entirely different set of challenges in teaching writing than GED teachers. GED teachers have available to them a plethora of books, web resources, workshops, and practice tests that help them in instructing and evaluating students in writing a

satisfactory GED essay. Workforce teachers have a more limited set of resources. If their program can afford it, they may have access to a work-related program of study, such as Contemporary’s *Work Matters*, or PBS Literacy Link’s *Workplace Essential Skills*.



These packages do a wonderful job of helping a teacher cover the basics of job-related topics such as resumés, cover letters, and job applications, but they are of little use when a student can’t write a job objective or compose a cogent list of his or her job skills. To help our learners increase their basic skills while gaining valuable workforce readiness skills, I developed a work readiness curriculum that incorporates writing in every lesson and supplementary writing activities for any teacher to use.

We start our first class with an introduction and then a goal-setting writing activity. In the introduction, students interview each other and write the answers to their partner’s questions on a sheet of paper. They later introduce their partner to the class using that sheet of paper.

Our writing activities culminate in filling out a job application and writing an effective resumé, a cover letter, and a thank you letter for an interview.

In the goal-setting activity, I give students a check-off list of goals, to which they are free to add if they choose. Once they have completed their goal sheet, they go to a computer and type their list or paragraph. At this point in time, I am more interested in their thought processes and comfort with computer use than with correct grammar, punctuation, and word usage.

As we progress through the classes, we do an Internet-based assessment that matches an individual’s personality with a group of jobs. After narrowing their job choices, students write a paragraph in Microsoft Word rating the assessment and explaining why they chose the profession that they did. We then move on to getting free email accounts; students write emails to each other before they send me the attachments of their Word assignments from the previous class. We learn copying and pasting from the Internet using an online career planning tool, and students add their own paragraphs at the end of their papers. We learn to interpret Help Wanted ads, and then students write a Help Wanted ad with a partner.

“Let’s Talk About Writing”

(continued from page 9)

KH: You said that before you started really actively studying and taking GED classes, you didn’t really write very much at all. Do you feel as though that at this point you would say that now you enjoy writing at all, or is it just something that you’ve gotten better at because you know you have to do it for, say, the test?

FL: Well, it’s something I’ve gotten better at, but also I’ve found myself wanting to write more, because I think when you are a better writer you also read better and vice versa. So, by me reading now, more, I have become a better writer, but also I’m in the process of getting even better.

KH: And when you read the newspaper or the novel that you mentioned you’re reading, do you pay attention to the way things are written and sort of figure some things out? Do you notice yourself doing that?

FL: I always look for grammar and stuff like that. Once, I wouldn’t have looked for that. But now, you see how someone has written something and you always question, “Is that written correctly?” So, I do that now.

“I’ve found myself wanting to write more, because I think when you are a better writer you also read better and vice versa.”

KH: Yes, that’s an excellent place to look for some modeling. Have you ever considered writing “your story” down? Does that appeal to you, or to write your own story that’s not for class, but more of a personal thing?

FL: Oh, like my life story? Actually, that hasn’t ever crossed my mind, but that sounds quite interesting ... to do something like that in the near future ... that’s a good possibility!

KH: Well, I want to thank you for talking about writing, and your experience with writing! I like how you mentioned that the reading that you’re doing is having an impact on your writing.

FL: Oh yes, it has a big impact. I still have to do more, regardless.

KH: Well, keep up the emails to me, because I like that, and thank you very much. It’s always a pleasure to spend time with you.

FL: Thank you. ■

Kristin Hott is an eLearn Virginia mentor and a Middle College instructor at J. Sargeant Reynolds. She has taught for Richmond Public Schools Adult Education.

Our writing activities culminate in filling out a job application and writing an effective resumé, a cover letter, and a thank you letter for an interview. We work on form, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and effective communication throughout the course, but I especially stress those elements with the aforementioned activities. Many adults are uncomfortable promoting themselves and their skills. They tell me they consider it bragging. I tell them that most of the time they are underselling themselves; they have far more skills and talents than they realize.

As our final project, students learn Microsoft PowerPoint and make a slide show addressing such topics as: “My Skills Include..,” “I Would

Make a Good Employee Because..,” “My Dream Job Would Be,” “What I Learned in Class,” etc. This is where I get to stand back and observe how much the students have learned about both writing and computer use and how much self-confidence they have gained. Then, I reevaluate the curriculum for the next go-round. I have learned a lot teaching this class and feel proud when my students later contact me to inform me that they have found jobs. It’s a very rewarding experience. ■

Susan Moore-Parkhurst is a Local Instructional Coordinator, Curriculum Specialist, Career Counselor, and Career and Computer Preparation Instructor at New River Community College.

Adult ESOL Students Express Their Voices Through Process Writing

(continued from front page)

These two authors crafted their stories using a process approach to Adult ESOL writing instruction. Their teachers and classmates collaborated with them as they penned these powerful stories and published them in *Our Voices*, a Prince William County Public Schools Adult Education EL/Civics publication.

Our EL/Civics Process Writing Journey

The PWCS Adult Education ESOL Program process writing journey began during the 2008-2009 school year. By means of a VDOE EL/Civics grant, we began to implement a vision to use an integrated communicative approach to language instruction, teaching and strengthening all four language skills through process writing. Our ultimate objective would be to equip students with English literacy and confidence to engage in democratic dialogue with the wider community. Since we first began implementing this EL/Civics vision in 2008, adult ESOL students at all instructional levels have composed and published close to 1,500 articles and stories, comprising more than 700 pages in six editions of *Our Voices*.

Steps to Achieving Our Writing Goals

Because the success of any language program is directly supported by the knowledge and buy-in of its instructors, process writing training is first on our EL/Civics agenda at the start of each school session. Teachers receive basic training on how and why to implement our EL/Civics writing

program. During training, teachers consider and discuss the importance of becoming facilitators who embrace process writing instruction as a complex course of action that includes prewriting activities, drafting sessions, peer review conferences, and revision guidance, along with student publishing and presentation. In addition to training, teachers also receive access to a full range of PWCS process writing curricula, including *Our Voices*, *Our Lives*, *Our Community (OVOLOC)* writing lessons and *Our Voices Are Not Silent* reading/writing lessons. All of these resources, plus a revised publication entitled *Learning English: The Journey Begins with You*, are already accessible to the public through our PWCS Adult Education Program website or will be available in August 2011.



Equipped with training and *OVOLOC* lessons, our teachers transform their classrooms into writing workshops where interaction and authentic communication promote freedom, desire, and confidence to share ideas that are important to students' own lives, even if the language learners' English is not yet *perfect*. Full of inspiration and a sense of trust, students begin to organize and draft their ideas on paper. At beginning levels, authors incorporate illustrations to support meaning. Intermediate and advanced writers learn how to construct paragraphs in order to share their ideas as articles or stories. Next comes peer review. Following a model, students work in cooperative groups to give praise, ask questions, and offer



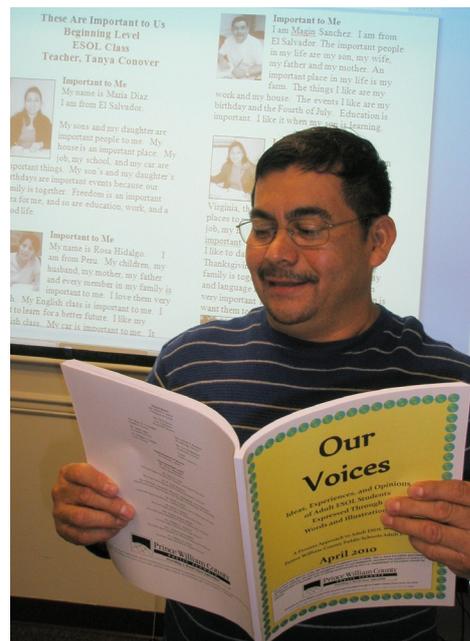
suggestions for improving rough drafts. At this point in the process, everyone has a chance to collaborate, exchange opinions, and make a difference in their own classroom community. In other words, democratic dialogue blooms as the sound of meaningful communication in English fills each classroom. Ultimately, with lots of support from their instructor, each student completes and edits a final draft for publication.

Toward the end of each class session, every author receives a copy of *Our Voices*. When they see their name and work in print, published writers are proud of their accomplishments and eager to share their voices with an even wider learning community. For this reason, our EL/Civics initiatives have expanded to include other opportunities for students to express thoughts and ideas that are important to them. One major initiative includes a student-organized OVOLC Literacy Fair. At this event, our whole PWCS Adult ESOL



international community works together to share class presentations that celebrate literacy in unique, creative ways.

When asked to give feedback on our 2009-2010 initiatives, our student leaders put it like this, "*The motivation was great. Our Voices means that it is about the students This really improves communication skills. It's a good way to learn to have confidence. We were happy.*" Positive feedback such as this keeps us motivated to continue to learn from and expand our EL/Civics process writing journey. ■



Tanya Conover is Prince William County Schools Adult Education ESOL Program EL/Civics Coordinator.

Progress Teacher Feature: Barbara Hicks (continued from page 3)

you're the doctor." Students call out actions, which Hicks carries out enthusiastically; the class takes good-hearted enjoyment in having Hicks lie down on the floor and hold her breath.

The activity wraps up, and learners file into the hall to end the evening with their weekly visit to the computer lab. Hicks leads, asking the students to give directions ("turn right") to the lab as they walk. In the lab, students work on the "Doctors and Medicine" unit of the U.S.A. Learns website while Hicks pulls individuals aside for midterm review conferences. Soon, it is 9:45, and time for students to leave.

After observing the high energy in Hicks' nearly three-hour evening class, it is easy for me to see why REEP ESOL Lead Teacher Emily Beckett nominated Hicks for the *Progress*

Teacher Feature. Beckett described Hicks as "thoughtful, creative, daring, and very engaging in her craft," but above all, she cited her reflective approach to lesson planning and implementation as a model for other teachers.

REEP teaches a life skills curriculum; Hicks covers about four different topics each term, selected with student input. "Obviously, now we're in English for health, for the doctor," says Hicks. Within each unit, Hicks begins with a needs assessment. Sometimes, as in the lesson I observed, she finds she has materials to address students' needs.

For other topics, Hicks has had to invent much of the curriculum herself. One class was concerned about the question: What do I do if I'm pulled over? "There's *Continued on page 19 ...*

Writing and the GED[®] Essay: An Interview with Marjorie Wine, GEDTS

Editor's Note: In January, I spoke with Marjorie Wine, Associate Director of Assessment Services at GED Testing Service. Read on for highlights from our conversation; a longer version of the interview, including more about range finding and pre-writing, has also been posted to the Progress website.

HILLARY MAJOR: So, I'll start with a basic question: what's holistic scoring, and how does holistic scoring work on the GED essay?

MARJORIE WINE: Well, instead of breaking down a writing sample into its elements of organization and development, mechanics and usage, etc., holistic scoring is designed to get an overall impression of how well the test taker communicates through writing. When our readers read the essay, they are able to give it one score that incorporates all of those ideas of organization and development and all of those bulleted points on our rubric, but no one element is weighted more than any other, so they can compensate for one another. If someone has spelling errors, that may be okay because they've got well developed ideas; or, if somebody has a really well organized, thoughtful grouping of ideas, that may overcome some other issues with, say, a couple of grammatical errors.

HILLARY: I couldn't help but notice that "organization" came up twice. Do you think that organization is the element that sticks out most for the readers?

MARJORIE: I actually do not. Organization is one of those things that is fairly easy to teach: we see a lot of the five paragraph essay format. I want to be clear that that is not the only format that people can use to get a good score or a passing score. People can receive the full range of scores using any range of organizational structures for their essays. However, the five paragraph essay is one of those good teachable tools that seems to work pretty well as a guide for writers who may have a little less experience in really composing a fully thought-out essay. Sometimes we talk about the idea of mental paragraphing, so that visually an essay may have one paragraph but all of its ideas are really well thought out and really well expressed. That essay may still get a pretty good score even if it's not in the very traditional, five paragraph format.

HILLARY: How do you think that the way that the readers and you guys at GED Testing Service (GEDTS) use the GED essay rubric is different from or similar to the way teachers might be used to using rubrics in their classes?

MARJORIE: Well, the one thing that I really have to stress is we never, ever apply the rubric in isolation. The rubric is full of abstract language that doesn't mean very much unless you have examples to illustrate what that abstract language means. When we are training readers, when we engaged in our range finding process (which is how we develop the training materials

Some Notes from Virginia GED Administrator Debbie Bergtholdt

I'd like to thank Marjorie Wine for taking the time to do an interview for *Progress*. I took a look at Virginia's 2010 first-time writing test takers and found some interesting numbers. Of the 15,028 first time testers, only 79 wrote an essay off topic but 701 wrote an inadequate essay. (In the score area of the GED transcript, an inadequate score is represented by two asterisks [**], indicating that the essay scored

less than a 2.) The largest single score was 410, which had 965 examinees. There were 1,210 near-passers with scores of 390 or 400. Amazingly, 19 testers scored a perfect 800 on the writing test! You can find these numbers for your testing center by asking your chief examiner to query them at NRSpro.com.

for readers), we are very, very careful to compare papers to papers rather than comparing papers to abstract language in the rubric. We use exemplars throughout the process so that we can make sure that papers get scored consistently from prompt to prompt. Again, the rubric doesn't mean a whole lot unless you have sample essays to explain it. I know that teachers will often try to apply that rubric, and they may well be interpreting it very similarly to how we interpret it, but it's harder to judge that if they

“We never, ever apply the rubric in isolation.”

don't have the exemplar papers to help guide them.

HILLARY: Do you think that GED teachers should show the GED rubric to their students?

MARJORIE: This is a tough question, actually. As I said, that rubric is never used in isolation during scoring. I'm working on putting up a PowerPoint presentation that will illustrate some sample test taker responses at each score point. It will include roughly three papers that show a high, medium, and low essay at each score point, very similar to what we would give our readers. When that's up on our website, teachers will be able to download it and have better information to share with their students. I'm reluctant to advise sharing the rubric with students without having exemplar papers to go with it. But once those materials are available, I strongly encourage all instructors to go to the website and absolutely share them with students. If students can see how other students have responded, what gets a 4, what gets a 3, what gets a 2, that could be really illustrative and helpful.

HILLARY: There is always a lot of curiosity among teachers and learners about who the readers and scorers are going to be. I've often heard teachers tell students to write the essay "like you are writing for your grandma," to stay very proper in their subject matter and language and avoid any slang. What do you think about that kind of approach and, in general, how do you think test takers should think of the idea of "audience"?

MARJORIE: I want to stress that we are focused on how well test takers communicate their ideas in general. Sometimes, a lot of use of slang or nonstandard English can impede reading. In

general, however, those things are taken in and weighed against the strengths the paper may have, so it's hard to say that a person would be ineligible for a 4 if he wrote a really compelling essay that happened to use some colorful language here and there. I'm reluctant to say that test takers need to stray far from language they are comfortable using, because I tend to think they will communicate better if they write in their own words. The main thing is that they communicate with clarity, bring a certain level of insight, and keep in mind that there is an audience – but that audience may well be a little more generous than this idea of their grandmother (depending on who their grandmother is).

HILLARY: I've heard from GEDTS that the GED scorers know that 45 minutes to write an essay isn't the way things usually work in the real world, so what they are looking for is a good rough draft. What does "good rough draft" mean?

MARJORIE: To me, what a good rough draft means is that, again, the focus is on communicating your thoughts to your reader. You may have spelling errors; you may leave out a detail or make a point that, if you'd had time, you would have elaborated further; but, the overall impact of the essay you have written is still communicative, focused, and really gets across the point you intend for your readers to understand when you finish.

There are some misconceptions out there that I would love to be able to clear up. One is that I get a lot of questions about what constitutes an "off topic" essay response. Some instructors call me up and say that they are telling students that they will get an off topic if they don't respond to every word in the prompt. That is not true. The prompt is designed to elicit writing. It's just to get test takers writing. We want to make sure that they have at least read the prompt and are responding to the correct prompt as marked in their answer document, but they may misinterpret the prompt, they may misread some word, they may transpose some kind of meaning and answer according to what they think the prompt means. Those responses can still be perfectly good essays that are eligible for the full range of scores.

The other misconception is that a 4 is an A+ paper. I often hear from

Continued on page 16...

Writing and the GED Essay: An Interview with Marjorie Wine, GEDTS (continued from page 15)

people who think it's really hard to get a 4, but at GEDTS, we do not want to make 4s prohibitive. To put this into teacher classroom language, a 1 is going to be at the very low end, but a 2 is going to be somewhere in the D to C range, the 3 is going to be in the C+ to B range, and a 4 is B+ and above. A 4 is not an A+. That's another message that I think is important for people to hear.

HILLARY: A lot of students and teachers are really worried about handwriting – shape, size, etc. Does neatness count?

MARJORIE: I was actually talking to one of our psychometricians about this recently, and she shared with me some studies showing that readers are actually able to give a little bit of leeway for handwriting. I think it's a less important issue than a lot of people think. Now, neat handwriting is great; I would never say that it's not: when we are range finding essays and we read the sloppy ones, they are a little bit tougher to get through, but when you are in the flow of scoring (and I can say this because I entered the assessment industry through scoring), you get used to reading handwriting. It really doesn't create the kind of bias that people may assume.

HILLARY: From reading essays, from seeing lots of sample essays, is there an aspect of writing that you think needs to get more instructional attention?

MARJORIE: We talked a little bit about audience awareness. That's certainly not weighted above other aspects of writing, but one of the things that I think is really important is the idea that you are talking to someone when you are writing, that you are trying to communicate a message, that you are trying to stay focused. All of those aspects and dimensions that are bulleted in our rubric all work together to communicate to an audience. I think that audience awareness is a big thing.

I would also love to be able to see more students able to make an argument, to use that

rhetorical structure and be able to say, "This is my opinion, this is why I believe it, and this is the evidence I can use to support it." Those are really important skills that can only serve to improve test taker responses.

HILLARY: How would you recommend people get ready for the GED test?

MARJORIE: Well, this is a bigger pedagogical issue. My advice is for test takers to read. Truly, philosophically one of the things that I hold really dear is that the way to become a really good writer is to read. You can internalize the way that the English language works, and particularly the way that written language works, if you read and read widely. I'm not saying that you have to read a lot of novels and literature – read magazines, read newspapers, read pamphlets when you are at the doctor's office, just have language in your head. It is amazing how much people can learn about writing just from reading.

It's not a very specific instruction, I know, but I would really like to see the overarching power of reading on writing emphasized.

HILLARY: I couldn't agree more. I think that sometimes teachers know that yes, reading's important, but they also worry it's not going to prepare learners for these standardized tests. Having someone reiterate that these skills and this time spent does transfer and will affect how learners perform in those high stakes situations is, I think, very affirming.

MARJORIE: I would advocate as well for classroom practice essays, when people come in and are given an allotment of time when they can write an in-class essay. I'm sure that many of our instructors use exercises like this. These can be great as long as students are getting really good feedback about things like organizational structure, idea development, and audience awareness.

HILLARY: In Virginia, we've had some involvement in Phase I of the pilot for the computer-based

“My advice for test takers is to read and read widely.”

testing format, and we're moving toward Phase II. How will that format impact the writing test, what should teachers know, and how should they be helping their students prepare?

MARJORIE: When that question started coming up, I went to our psychometricians because we had just done a study comparing the computer-based responses to the paper-based responses. We are finding that there are no real meaningful differences, on average. We are going to conduct some more studies to back that up, but so far we have not found that instruction needs to change in any particular way to respond to the computer issue in specific.

HILLARY: Have you looked at the data in age ranges? I think a big fear among our teachers is that older students won't be able to adapt to this format.

MARJORIE: We have, actually, and we have not found that there are any meaningful differences in any age range, in any particular demographic, in any particular socioeconomic group. We are not really finding those differences.

HILLARY: That's good to hear. Keeping on the topic of things to come, can you give us any insights into how GEDTS is thinking about the 21st century initiative and specifically what might be coming down the line when it comes to the writing test?

MARJORIE: I'm sure you guys have had a chance to look over the Common Core documents. One of the fundamentals in the Common Core philosophy is how important writing is – being able to communicate in written language and across content areas. We are still very much in the planning stages, and we haven't actually made any decisions, but we are going to be aligning the test with the Common Core. Therefore, you can expect that writing is going to be a particular point of interest on our test moving forward. ■

Rubrics for Writing

For examples of different kinds of writing rubrics and information about creating your own rubrics for classroom use, check out the sites below.

[GED Scoring Rubric](#)

[Why Use Rubrics?](#)

[Types of Rubrics](#)

[Rubric Examples](#)

[Creating an Assessment Unit Process: Backwards Design](#)

[Transparent Assessment](#)

[The Basics of Rubrics \(holistic vs. analytic rubrics\)](#)

[Rubistar: Creating Rubrics](#)

Thinking in Threes:

Scoring 500+ on the GED Essay

by Patricia Wyche Post

How can a student skyrocket from a 440 on a GED subtest to a 520? That can happen by scoring a 3 instead of a 2 on the essay portion of the Language Arts, Writing Test.

Sounds easy enough. But anyone who has taught writing in an adult education class knows the task is monumental indeed.

A useful tool in helping students accomplish this feat is Brian Backman's book *Thinking in Threes: The Power of THREE in Writing*. Originally published by Cottonwood Press (recently acquired by Prufrock Press), this concise reference book includes many memorable, fun, and effective ways to help students write with **more focus, better organization, and greater substance**.

Here is an abbreviated list of the steps Backman recommends when faced with any writing task.

1 Turn the topic into a question.

Topic: *The benefits of regular exercise*
Turned into a question: *What are the benefits of regular exercise?*

2 Brainstorm: Come up with 10-20 answers to the question.

Write down every answer that comes to mind without comment or criticism.

- * meet people
- * builds immune system
- * good for your heart
- * reduces blood pressure
- * lose weight
- * keeps youthful appearance
- * clothes fit better
- * stress reliever
- * nice hobby
- * think clearer
- * improves posture
- * fun

3 State the answer in **threes**.

Essay answer: *There are **three** important benefits of regular exercise.*

4 Think about details, examples, or rationale to support each idea or answer. The support

must meet **three** criteria: it should be **relevant, specific, and varied**.

5 Choose three ideas that are the easiest to support. Put them in order.

If the answer requires sequencing, use transitional words that suggest time.

If the answer asks for a description, start describing from one particular location, then systematically move from one point to another, describing each area in succession.

If the answer calls for reasons, effects, or qualities (as this question does), arrange the ideas from least important to most important.

health looks attitude

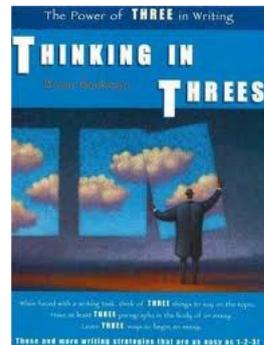
6 Write a thesis statement that is a **three-pronged, parallel, preview** of the paper. (These terms are carefully explained in *Thinking in Threes*.)

*There are three important benefits of regular exercise. Exercising **improves a person's health, it improves a person's looks, and it improves a person's attitude.***

The basic outline is now created. The thesis statement, along with an ample supply of ideas generated from brainstorming, forms the skeleton of the essay.

7 The first paragraph is the introduction, but **do not write it first**. Since the paper has not been scripted, an introduction cannot be written. Skip a few lines and come back to this.

8 Write the body of the essay. Follow the pattern on the next page:



- Give details about the first idea in the first paragraph of the body.

*Most significantly, exercising **improves health** because it is good for the heart, the lungs, and the immune system. Studies have shown regular exercise lowers the risk of heart attack. Along those same lines, some doctors have prescribed exercise rather than high blood pressure medicine.*

- Explain the second idea in the second body paragraph.

*Additionally, exercising **improves looks**. Excess weight comes off, so clothes fit better. When muscles are stronger, posture improves. And when posture improves, a brisk peppiness in the step causes a person to appear youthful and vigorous.*

- Support the third idea in the third body paragraph.

*Most importantly, exercising almost immediately **improves a person's attitude**. After a stressful day at work, having a change of scenery by running, jogging, or playing basketball with friends gets a person's mind off his worries and helps him refocus. This turns an otherwise difficult day into a fun-filled evening.*

- 9 Write the introduction. Briefly state the three ideas in the order presented in the paper.

*In today's youthful culture, everyone wants to live longer, more productive lives. Exercising is one of the most beneficial ways to get more out of life. Many who have tried it have found that exercising **improves their health, their looks, and their attitude**.*

- 10 Write the conclusion as the fifth paragraph. Reference each idea that was mentioned in the introduction, using slightly different wording. Do not add any new ideas in the concluding paragraph.

With all of these benefits and more, it is no wonder that more and more people are finding the elusive "fountain of youth" through exercising. As a result, their lives are healthier, happier, and fuller because they chose to exercise.

After learning the *Thinking in Threes* process, students approach their writing assignments with much more confidence. Armed with a strategy, their writing becomes more focused, organized, and meaningful. And, in the long run, learning to write well will mean much more than an additional point on the GED essay. ■

Patricia Wyche Post is an adult education teacher with the Norfolk Even Start Family Literacy Program.

Progress Teacher Feature: Barbara Hicks (continued from page 13)

no materials geared toward this level for that sort of language function," Hicks shared, "so basically we made a little story about it."

English for work is always the first life skill requested, but, when students work in different industries, the topic can be frustrating. Hicks developed a needs-based personal dictionary project: students form small groups based on their occupations and, using magazines and the *Oxford Picture Dictionary*, create customized picture dictionaries divided into four categories: things at work, actions at work, places at work, problems at work. Hicks builds on students' self-selected vocabulary through short cloze dialogues in each category. Emily Beckett explained that the dictionaries are "motivating to students because they are able to practice vocabulary that is immediately applicable or necessary for their particular job goals."

Teaching "feels a little like a sideshow sometimes," but Hicks has found success in learning to pay attention to the physical environment (music, lights, etc.) and biology. Most students come to her class after working eight or nine hours, so she tries to get them up and moving. "Feed the human need," she says, smiling. "That's why I give them chocolate."

She tries to celebrate successes, like the "shake hands with 5 people" exercise. "[I] congratulate them: you spoke in English for 10 minutes! [I try to] give them joy in what's going on." When asked her advice for other instructors, Hicks looks surprised for a minute, then nods firmly: "Keep learning, keep listening. Have fun whenever possible." ■

Hillary Major is Progress editor and Communications and Publications Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

Writing for Rubrics and Rubrics for Writing

by Kate Daly

Looking back on how I was graded in high school and college, I remember a lot of essays, summaries, lab reports, research papers, occasional short stories, and even a thesis; however, it wasn't until graduate school that I came face to face with an actual writing rubric. Our professor handed out a detailed rubric that spelled out exactly how we would be evaluated and how much each part of our paper (i.e., relevant research, thesis development, supporting details, and format) would contribute to our final grade. Her expectations for the assignment were high, but they were crystal clear. It was an enlightening moment, because it made me reflect on my collective academic writing experiences up until that moment and wonder how my instructors came to the grades they had given me. What exactly did that B mean, and how was it different from an A paper? And had I ever received feedback on a paper that I could actually use in my future writing?

Freshman English

At that time, I was teaching a freshman composition class and had already assigned several papers, none of which had come with a rubric. I wrote my students detailed comments about their grades, but I suspected that many of the grades I assigned were subjective and depended somewhat on the quality of the papers I had read before or after. I knew implicitly what made a good paper, but a rubric would provide an explicit rationale for a score.

For our next writing assignment, a short argument paper, I created a rubric that outlined exactly how I would be grading the assignment. I focused on areas, such as organization and clarity, that had been difficult for the class, and I weighted those areas more heavily. I also included elements from the course objectives to ensure this assignment really did work toward the overall goals of the class.

I handed out the rubric with the assignment, and we reviewed it as a class. Using the rubric as a guide, I planned the next few weeks of

classes with activities and assignments that echoed the various aspects of the rubric and the writing assignment. Before students turned in their papers, I asked them to use the rubric to self-evaluate their work and to hold onto it until I returned their graded assignments.

These were by far the strongest papers I had read that semester. I returned the papers with the rubrics and asked students to compare their grades with their self-evaluations. Most students had a realistic idea of how

Had I ever received feedback on a paper that I could actually use in my future writing?

they had done, and many were able to pinpoint areas they knew they needed to strengthen. We used this feedback to review weaker areas and to prepare for the next writing assignment. With a relatively simple, yet detailed, half-page rubric, I noticed a general rise in confidence level and work quality in the class, and I have used rubrics for writing instruction ever since.

English Language Learners (ELLs)

The role of the rubric in my ESOL classes became even more important than in my freshman composition courses. Not only was I spelling out the expectations for a specific writing assignment, but I was also detailing certain conventions of academic work in this country, which differed greatly from many of my students' educational backgrounds.

In addition to laying out my own expectations for an assignment, as well as the course goals and objectives, I left space for students to write in their own goals for the assignment, a "what I want to improve" section on all of our writing rubrics. I wanted students to be able to put more of their own personal goals into the assignment and to focus on the skills they were interested in honing. Usually, during brainstorming or group writing activities, I circulated and recorded the class's "what I want to improve" statements. This list helped me in lesson planning and served as an ongoing needs assessment for the course. For example, if several students mentioned that they wanted to improve their verb tense usage, I would incorporate extra verb review exercises

and activities into the lessons. This section improved my teaching efficiency, because I was more able to address the actual needs and interests of my learners, rather than just what I was scheduled to cover based on a course syllabus. It also provided a simple way for my students to tell me where they felt they needed the most improvement.

The first rubrics I developed were for my high-intermediate to advanced level composition classes, where the students were focused on organization, writing conventions, and thesis development, as well as grammar and word choice. I wondered how rubrics would work in a lower-level class where the focus was on a more general ability to communicate an idea and to use basic language structures. Instead of the detailed, analytic rubrics that I had used to assess individual components of my learners' writing, I created simpler, more holistic rubrics for my beginning students. These rubrics emphasized the clarity of the general idea of the content, as well as specific vocabulary usage. For example, if we were studying a unit on family members, the rubric for a paragraph on a student's

family included the use of appropriate family vocabulary and the clarity of the passage (i.e., Did I understand what the student wrote?).

Often the use of rubrics is reserved for placement purposes or for summative assessments that determine a learner's overall performance in a course, and students rarely benefit from these rubrics. Including rubrics as part of the assignment and part of the revision and review process can improve their writing skills, while at the same time alleviating the anxiety that comes from not knowing what the instructor expects. When a rubric reflects the demands of the task and the skills that the student is working to develop and improve, it can serve as a powerful learning tool for the student, as well as a valuable planning tool for the instructor. However, I try to remember that, as much as I value the rubric for instruction, my learners still occasionally need to write just for fun, and sometimes I have to put the rubric away. ■

Kate Daly is Instructional Specialist at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

Rubric Example: Body Paragraph Evaluation Rubric

Checklist	0	1	2	Comments
1. Starts with a transition				
2. First sentence contains appropriate idea from thesis				
3. Contains one to three explanatory sentences				
4. Contains two to four sentences about specific details				
5. Details are colorful, interesting, and appropriate				
6. Ends with a good closing sentence				
7. Contains no run-ons or sentence fragments				
8. Is free of errors in agreement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • subject/verb agreement (singular or plural) • pronoun selection correct (singular or plural) • pronoun selection correct (subject or object) 				
9. Is free of punctuation errors				
10. Is free of spelling errors				
11. Handwriting is easy to read				

This rubric is adapted from the Samaritan House Training Centre's Bridging the Gap educational materials, retrieved from Canada's National Adult Learning Database (www.nald.ca).

Using Personal Weblogs to Teach Writing in the GED Classroom

by Richard Sebastian

What happens when adult GED students are given opportunities to use blogs to help them improve their writing? How do these students feel about their blogging experiences? What kinds of written products do they produce?

These were the driving questions behind a qualitative research study, informed by theory and research on composition, suggesting the utility of blogs for encouraging collaboration, helping the development of audience awareness, and giving students the opportunity to write outside of class (Duffy & Bruns, 2006; Ferdig & Trammel, 2004; Oravec, 2002; Richardson, 2006; Williams & Jacobs, 2002).

The high failure rate of the GED Writing test and the fact that many test-takers pass with only marginal writing ability suggests that

adult education programs need to investigate new ways to teach writing to adult students to better prepare them to pass the Writing test and expose them to the full power of writing so they can produce more effective writing for use on, as well as beyond, the GED essay.

This qualitative study of an urban Fast Track GED class investigated how technology could help better prepare adult GED students to be effective writers by using a web-based publishing platform—called a weblog or blog—to allow GED students to publish, share, and respond to class writing online.

A blog is a website that allows users to easily publish—or post—writing (as well as images, movies, and hyperlinks) to the Internet. Most blogs are designed to be both informational and conversational, and as such typically include feedback systems that allow online audiences to

J.R. the Word Processor

J.R. reads the feedback left on his blog by his instructor. The feedback is mostly positive, but the instructor, Alan, recommends that J.R. add a few specific details to his essay in order to make it more effective. J.R. carefully clicks the browser's Back button and rereads the post. His movements are deliberate. He examines the first paragraph of his essay. "That paragraph would be better ... here," saying "paragraph" as if the word has taken on a new and deeper meaning for him. Getting the instructor's attention, he asks, "Could you show me again about how to cut and paste?"

Learning to cut and paste text in his blog, which allowed him to rearrange prewritten sections of his essay with the click of a button, was a revelation to J.R. and seemed to provide him with the technological hook he needed to focus on editing his written text and make the needed effort to improve the quality of his writing. Unlike writing with pencil and paper, writing with a computer did not require him to erase and rewrite what he had already written.

He simply clicked and dragged across a section of text and placed it elsewhere. Or, he dragged his mouse across a word, a sentence, or a passage and, with one keystroke, deleted it. "Like I didn't know anything about cutting and pasting and all that until the [instructor] showed me how to do that," he admits. "You can go back and make a correction almost effortlessly," he says. "And when you sit back and reread over it, it's a lot easier. The touch of a button makes you put forth more I guess. It's so easy."

If he felt intimidated by suddenly finding himself in front a computer that first day of class, or by the prospect of blogging, J.R. did not show it. Perhaps his training as a boxer prepared him to deal with unexpected situations and to keep his balance no matter what came his way. Or, perhaps his reaction was mitigated by the fact that, a month before signing up for class, J.R. had been shot four times by a trusted family member, an experience that had given him a new perspective on his life, a perspective he described in his first blog post for class:

If I wouldn't have gotten shot I still would be working every day all day with no GED and no time to get one and would have kept the dead end job that I now have; or should I say "have

respond to posts and linking mechanisms that allow authors to create a blogroll, or a list of hyperlinks to other blogs or websites.

Blogs have the potential to help improve the overall quality of adult GED students' written products, such as texts generated from sample writing prompts similar to those students may encounter on the GED Writing test, as well as other styles of writing, such as poems, expressive writing, or journal entries. Using blogs in the GED classroom may also help adult students to better identify themselves as legitimate writers confident in their ability to compose in various contexts and who view writing as a tool they can call on beyond the limited requirements of the GED essay.

Research on Writing Composition

Composition instruction used to be primarily concerned with the surface features of writing; that is, composition that reflects a writer's understanding of standard grammar, accuracy with punctuation and spelling, and mastery of different compositional forms and genres

for now". Like I told my cousin I don't look at the bad side because the only bad side is I got shot but so much good has come following after.

The above sample is taken from one of only two posts written by J.R. during the five and a half weeks he attended class. However, while he only posted two essays to his blog along with two comments to classmates' blogs, J.R., unlike most of the students in the class, repeatedly returned to these two posts to make revisions. The changes he made to his posts were based on feedback from the instructor's comments to his blog, as well as influenced by the GED essay scoring guidelines he learned about in class. His revisions—such as adding specific details to his essays, correcting run-on sentences, and adding explanatory sentences that helped readers better understand his point—improved his published essays. While his willingness to revise his posts may have been related in part to events in his life that gave him a new commitment to earning his GED credential, J.R. admitted that part of this willingness to revise came from the word processing capabilities of the blog software:

If I was to write [my essay] on paper, and then we go over it, and you were like, "OK, maybe

(Parson, 1985). From this perspective, effective writing was a matter of following rules, adapting compositions to formulae, and achieving technical mastery of formal writing conventions and modes. Writing was considered a solitary act, one in which the goal was to "get it right the first time" (Cotton, 1988).

This traditional approach to writing instruction that emphasized the written products of writers has been shown to be almost wholly ineffective. Effective writing instruction should instead focus on the writers themselves and the complex processes they go through as they compose (Hillocks, 1986). While there is no agreed-upon set of instructional approaches that have been shown to be effective for all writers in all writing situations, most researchers agree that classroom instructional strategies should include developing audience awareness, providing structured feedback during the act of writing, guiding students in the revising and editing of written drafts, and dealing with any emotional issues that often interrupt or derail the writing process.

Continued on page 24 ...

you should do this or do that," I'd have to write it all over. Then I'd probably lose interest in it. But if it's on the computer—a few clicks, and read over it, and then feel like you accomplished something. I like the blog. I do. I like it a lot. I know it's just working on [a] blog, but it's showing me a lot more on how to work with computers.

J.R. clicks the mouse again and a block of text that he highlighted now appears on the computer screen two paragraphs below where it was before. Click and drag. Cut and paste. These phrases have a beat, a rhythm, like girls doing double-dutch, their jump ropes making skidding beats like the rap songs he likes to write. He reads the passage again, carefully adding periods to several run-on sentences with the tap of a keyboard. ∴

For more about J.R.'s experience, as well as profiles of "Tammy the Social Butterfly," "Nina's Voice in the Distance," and "Olivia the Reluctant Writer," visit *Progress* online.

Using Personal Weblogs to Teach Writing in the GED Classroom

(continued from page 23)

While there is limited empirical research on the effective educational use of blogs for writing instruction, there is support among both theorists and practitioners for the belief that the use of blogs increases motivation, encourages collaboration, and can ultimately improve students' writing ability. Instructional technologist Will Richardson suggests that blogging has "great value in terms of developing all sorts of critical thinking skills, writing skills, and information literacy among other things."

Engaging an audience of not only one's instructor and peers but also the larger, unknown audience on the web is motivating for students since the audience of readers is more authentic (Hernandez-Ramos, 2004). That blogs are available to students outside of the GED classroom makes them particularly relevant to adults, who often must interrupt or temporarily end their class enrollment due to job and family obligations.

Methodology

This qualitative study spanned a nine-week period of a GED Fast Track class which began in mid-October and ended in mid-December, meeting two times each week. The instructor had been teaching adult students part-time for approximately six years and had a wealth of experience in instructing adults. The teacher was familiar with and enthusiastic about using computer technology, believing his adult students benefit from the opportunity to use technology in his class. All students were new enrollees.

Table: Cross Case Chart of Assertions

	J.R.	Tammy	Nina	Olivia
Word processing	X	X	X	
Social contact	X	X	X	
Distance learning	X		X	

Avoidance

X

The class consisted of thirteen females and eight males. The average age was 28 years old. The youngest student was 18 years old; the oldest was 51 years old. All but four of the students identified themselves as African-American. Enrollment at the beginning of class was ten students but continued to increase, quickly climbing to 21 students after several weeks of class. The final student entered class three and a half weeks after the course began and only five weeks before it concluded.

However, due to absences and attrition, the number of students attending class at any one time was never more than

twelve and as low as two during classes that fell before and after the holidays.

Data gathering took place during the portion of class devoted to writing instruction, with the exception of interviews, which were held with students during the non-writing portion of class. Data collection also occurred online, by monitoring each student's personal blog.

Results

Four participants from the class were selected for more in-depth study in order to describe in more detail the variety of writing activities and experiences that transpired during the course of the class. All four participants were similar in the general ways they used their blogs to compose and publish their writing assignments for class. However, each case participant differed in the distinct ways that they performed these compositional and publishing acts. Their patterns of blog use were categorized into four typologies representing the distinct ways that participants interacted with their blogs, interactions that either supported or undermined participants' writing practice.

Blogging has "great value in terms of developing all sorts of critical thinking skills, writing skills, and information literacy."

1. Students participating in this study used blogs as a form of technology training.

Participants engaged in writing behavior because they perceived their learning to use a blog as a way to gain valuable workplace and technology skills. While participants didn't initially fully understand the use of computers as a way to improve their writing skills by using blogs to publish assignments, during interviews with the researcher and in exchanges during the class, most students expressed a positive view of having access to computers in the classroom, access that they saw as connecting with both their workplace and GED-related goals. These skills were as general as seeing blogs, and computers, as representing "the future" or as particular as valuing the cutting and pasting features of the blog word processing features. For some participants, this type of blog use led to an improvement in writing quality.

2. Students participating in this study used their blogs as a form of social contact.

Participants shared personal information and established more intimate contact with each other both through the personal content of their blog posts as well as through the types of comments they left on their classmates' blogs. While the instructor regularly promoted participants responding to their classmates' posts more formally, evaluating the content as a GED reader might, when participants did respond to classmates' writing, the responses were generally personal, almost diary-like, and often revealing.

Through the often spontaneous nature of their comments, this type of use of the blogs motivated participants to write more than they may have in a class in which student writing wasn't as easily shared or peer feedback encouraged. However, data analysis did not suggest that this type of writing activity led to a noticeable improvement in writing quality.

3. Students participating in this study used their blogs as a tool for distance learning.

Another way that participants in this class used their blogs was to access class materials, post writing assignments, and respond to instructor and peer feedback when they were not able to attend class, leading, for some participants, to an improvement in writing quality.

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4. Students avoided the use of their blogs.

While all students used their blogs in some way, it was clear that some participants made only limited use of their blogs or were reluctant to publish their writing because they were concerned about exposing their written errors, were embarrassed about the quality of their writing, or were sensitive to feedback from others about their writing errors. It is assumed that participants' lack of writing activity did not lead to an improvement in their writing skills.

Case participants were purposely sampled to provide in-depth descriptions of the four typologies of blog use that were observed to take place during the GED class. However, the way each case participant used his or her blog was not limited to a single typology, but often included other of the four types. The table shows a matrix of the case participants and which of the typologies each of them engaged in during the class. Visit the *Progress* website to read profiles of the four case study participants. An excerpt from J.R.'s profile (Typology 1) can be found on pages 22-23.

Conclusion

The argument for bringing blogs into the GED classroom was that using them could support effective writing practices such as publishing student writing, providing peer feedback, and allowing students to access their writing drafts outside of class, practices that would improve their writing. The evidence in this study supports that, to a limited degree, this happened during this GED Fast Track class. Students produced more writing, compared to earlier classes, through their commenting practices, and they practiced an increased amount of revision as well, which led, for some students, to an overall improvement in the quality of their pieces. These results suggest that blogs can effectively support the writing practices of adult GED students and provide them with opportunities and interactions that can lead to an improvement in writing quality, both on as well as beyond the GED Tests. ■

Richard Sebastian is VALRC Instructional Technology Specialist. See page 27 for works cited in this article. For a more in-depth version of this report, visit Progress online.

Teachers: Write or Wrong

by Jason Guard

Let's be honest. We can't teach our learners to write well if we're out of practice ourselves. There is a too-common story about parents reading a teacher's comments on their child's papers and finding that the writing isn't much better than the student's. In adult education, we don't have parents looking over our learners' shoulders, but we've still got to be accountable. We've got to model effective and even creative communication and practice what we preach.

According to some 2010 data obtained from GEDTS, in Virginia, 70 percent of passing GED essays scored a 2.0 or a 2.5. That is to say, most of the learners we call success stories are below "adequate" and barely above "marginal" by the standards the GED essay tests. Are we only holding our learners to a minimum standard? Is the working world going to require more rigorous writing of our learners than our classes did? How can we raise standards when it is often such a struggle to achieve our current results?

It starts with me.

One way to influence our learners to improve their writing is to show them that we are all on the same path. How we instructors express ourselves makes an impression on our learners. Writing is the only soft skill on the GED Tests. That means the teacher is the teaching tool. Could you write a 4-scoring essay in 45 minutes? I dare you to try. Gather your colleagues. Randomly select writing prompts. And grade each other's results using the holistic scoring method.

You need to love writing. Okay, maybe not love. But, you need to be in a relationship with writing, a relationship that you're openly working on. Writing isn't pretty when it's done with rusty tools. The ink dries up. The ideas don't flow. Your writing instrument needs to run like a well oiled machine. Getting to that point is hard work, and it's humbling. But, by showing our learners how we go from a list of notes, to an outline, to composed paragraphs, we model for them just how personal the process is. Everyone winds up with something different, and everyone's writing can be improved.



Back and Forth Forever

The process of writing is reciprocal. We respond to letters and messages with our own written words, and the cycle perpetuates itself. The composition process is honed through that practice of correspondence. But first, someone has to start it. Again, instructors must be leaders when it comes to writing. We have to give if we're going to get a return from our learners.

Most of our ABE/GED students love stories, letters, poetry, and drama. They may even believe they enjoy writing, but they don't attempt focused essays often, if ever, and not for an audience of critics. To acclimate them to the reality of the GED essay, create a culture of writing in your classroom. Ask your learners to name one thing they wrote over the past week. Letters, emails, text messages, directions? Have individuals or groups report out on their respective non-academic writing efforts. Take an interest, establish an expectation, and offer support.

Suggestions

Email: Conduct more business with your learners via email, and use the messages as a chance to work on composition skills. If they don't have email addresses, help them get accounts and learn to use them. They may not pick up the habit of online correspondence, but they'll be better able to respond to future web-based opportunities.

Blog: A class blog can be a great way to get people sharing ideas and working on their writing outside of class. Each learner can have their own blog, or you can set one up with multiple authors/contributors. Comments on blogs are writing, too. Make comments count by encouraging students to compose their responses purposefully and discussing them in class: how could you expound on a comment to turn it into an essay?

Writing on the Round: A learner starts by writing a body paragraph for an essay. The next learner adds a paragraph, and you discuss what



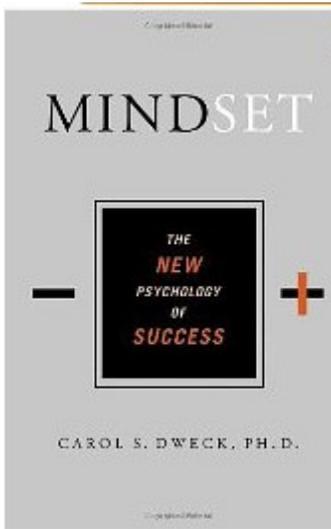
ideas join the two and the direction in which the essay's going. After several students have contributed paragraphs, lead a class discussion of the essay's theme, and guide the class in writing introduction and conclusion paragraphs for their creation. This collaborative approach to writing also works with sentences and can engage reluctant writers.

Letters to the Editor: Reading the newspaper offers great examples of different styles of organized writing and numerous topics that students can respond to with their own letters to the editor. Key here is that you can go first. Write a letter and get your learners involved in the organization of ideas and word choice. (Follow up with a call to sweet talk the paper into publishing your piece - or perhaps they can offer feedback on class letters that don't get published.) ■

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Using Personal Weblogs to Teach Writing in the GE Classroom: Works Cited (continued from page 25)

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Book Review

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success

by Carol S. Dweck / reviewed by Karen Chervenak

Here's a thought: maybe success isn't purely about innate talent or intelligence; maybe what is truly important is how we think about our abilities.

This is the premise of Carol Dweck's book, *Mindset*. Drawing upon years of research, as well as examples

from popular culture, business, and her own experiences as a teacher, Dweck illustrates the differences between the fixed and growth mindsets and explains their application in multiple arenas, including education.

According to Dweck, the fixed mindset is something that we should avoid and should help our learners to overcome. Those with the fixed mindset believe that you have either "got it" or you don't. In this mindset, effort is actually a bad thing because if you have to work really hard to achieve something, then you must not be good at it. Fixed mindset people always feel like they need to prove themselves, need

constant validation, and are overly concerned about making mistakes. The growth mindset, on the other hand, focuses on learning and self improvement. Effort is a good thing! These people are able to say, "I failed," rather than having the fixed mindset of "I am a failure," and each failure is only an opportunity to grow, learn, and improve. Guiding our learners to change their thinking from "I'm a horrible writer" to "I still have a lot to learn about writing" is, perhaps, an integral part of instruction.

As educators, we naturally praise our learners for a job well done, but Dweck cautions that we need to be mindful of how we praise and what messages we are sending. Depending on what you are praising, you may inadvertently be telling students how to think about themselves. She explains how praising intelligence or natural ability may actually be harmful to students and put them into a fixed mindset. Instead, we should teach our students to "love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning."

Karen Chervenak is GED and Distance Learning Coordinator at the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center.

News from the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center



Many *Progress* readers are already aware that George Bailey has accepted a new position, working with the Virginia Office of Adult Education and Literacy on communications and workforce projects. George joined the Resource Center in

1999 as GED Initiative Specialist and became Assistant Manager in 2006. Though his new position is contracted through Radford University's Office of Adult Education and Literacy Projects, George will remain located in Richmond; he looks forward to continued work in the field of adult education.

There have also been several assignment changes related to the Virginia Adult Educator Certification Program (from right to left): Vicky Sanborn will oversee the Program Manager strand; Kate Daly will work with the ABE/GED Instructor strand; Jeffrey Elmore will continue to manage the Support Staff strand and will take on the role of VALRC Training Coordination Specialist; and, Nancy Faux will continue to administer the ESOL Instructor strand.

