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PLTL in the Developmental Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Writing placement exam preparation can be broken down into small tasks overseen by Peer Leaders, following (though not precisely) patterns set out by Fred Keller in “Good-bye Teacher” in 1968. The mechanical aspect of writing, however, is never enough for the production of essays that communicate, something that requires audience and a desire to “speak.” Students in developmental classrooms often have problems beyond the writing itself: they may be test shy and may not be prepared to take on even college entry tasks without careful direction. Working with Peer Leaders, the developmental program can address the problems of mechanics and testing demands, the Peer Leaders taking on some of the responsibility for guiding students through the tasks. PLTL can also help address the broader problems of preparation for college and even for critical thinking, the Peer Leaders serving as role models. The pilot program at New York City College of Technology (CUNY) will be discussed.

Introduction

For the 2011-2012 school year, under the direction of A.E. Dreyfuss and Aaron Barlow, we conducted a test of the possibilities of using Fred Keller’s Personalized System of Instruction (PSI), much pared down, and the principles developed through the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) program. Though we are not yet prepared to state that the formula we developed is preferable than traditional methodologies in the Developmental Writing classroom, we do see room for hope. Students in Barlow’s fall semester class profited from the process—at least, those who attended regularly did (all but one of them passing the standardized exam at the end of the semester). In Sears’ class in the spring, results were in keeping with her past pattern of success. In Barlow’s spring class, there was a distinct decline in success—accountable, he believes, to the fact that a number of the students (at least a quarter of the total enrollment) had learning disabilities that were not shared with the instructor until close to the end of the semester.

Success in writing, for incoming City University of New York (CUNY) students, has little to do with success on the SAT, the Regents Exam or on the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW): results are simply markers, indicators that students may have command of an array of skills that, one hopes, will make them ready for required First Year Composition (FYC) classes. Among the skills suggested by passing grades on one of these tests are ability to follow instructions; command of other basic test-taking techniques; ability to organize a short essay and present it as a coherent, clearly organized whole; ability to reflect intelligently on a text (including command of paraphrasing); ability to develop new ideas relating to a text; ability to manipulate the structures of written English; and command of basic grammatical operations. In addition, students need to have an established foundation in critical thinking and questioning. The developmental-

writing course preparing students for the CATW exam and entry into FYC, then, needs a broad focus; simple test preparation is not going to be sufficient for the student.

Even though it does address a number of important skills, the test is only a marker on the road to broader progress. A student who does not learn to discuss and question will not likely succeed on the exam even though that student may be able to organize, paraphrase, and write clearly. Another student who has all of the writing skills but lacks an understanding of the necessary organization for and during the test itself may also fail.

Not having the necessary writing and critical-thinking skills, of course, has a tremendous impact on retention. In the short term, those who do not pass the test (after a specified number of chances) will not be allowed to continue in the college. Ability to succeed in the one course most common to entering students, FYC, is a marker of how the student will do later in her or his college career. Struggling there means there will be struggles elsewhere. Adequate preparation for FYC is a necessity.

Combining PSI and PLTL

Because this is an individual-centered process in a group classroom (unlike in PSI, where there is no necessary specified group class time or even necessary classroom), the activities cannot be quite as personalized as they are in an ideal PSI situation. Also, we had only two Peer Leaders per classroom. For classes of about twenty students, this is too few. Though students can be expected to take on some of the Peer Leader responsibilities as they master aspects of the course material, they cannot do so from the start. In a developmental situation, such as this, they also have to master aspects of the art of learning and even of teaching to an extent far beyond better prepared students.

The role-model aspect of the Peer Leader position cannot be under-emphasized. Even if they were better students from the start than the students in the developmental classroom, they come from the same background and attend the same college. They understand, much better than the instructor, exactly what may be bedeviling the students. With just two of them in the classroom, it is difficult for them to form the bonds necessary for students to trust them enough for their assistance to be as valuable as it might.

Each week, the instructors and Dreyfuss, after consulting with the Peer Leaders, developed a plan for the week, each looking somewhat like this:

Pilot program – 092W with Peer Leaders and Keller Instructional Methods
 Prof. Aaron Barlow, English Department
 AE Dreyfuss, Learning Specialist
 Mondays and Wednesdays, 11:30am-12:45pm

First session (Monday, August 29, 2011)

Time	Activity	Person	Materials
8 minutes	Welcome, instructions – review, on board	Prof. Barlow	
8-10 minutes	Students are asked for work in pairs: Interview their partner and take notes: -Where in New York are they from? What high school did they go to? What connections do they have to other places? -Find two things they have in common with each other	Students	Paper, writing instrument
10-12 minutes	Write, based on notes and memory of interview, about your partner. Be sure to include their name (and your name),	Students	Paper, writing

	what you found out, and what you have in common -turn in papers		instrument
5 minutes	Reading (Handout) – and instructions: Use all 35 minutes; arrange your time: Come up with three points in response to reading Explain your experience How does the reading relate to your experience?	Prof. Barlow	Reading
35 mins.	Write: Respond to reading by writing about your experience when you took the Writing test. Why did you fail?	Students	Paper, writing instrument
	Closing: Homework assignment?	Prof. Barlow	

Second session (Wednesday, August 31, 2011) – Peer Leaders present

Time	Activity	Person	Materials
5 minutes	Welcome, instructions – review, on board	Prof. Barlow	
18-20 minutes	Students are asked to form a circle with Professor, Peer Leaders, observer First person: states first name and something she/he likes to do; Second person: repeats what first person said, and adds her/his name and activity Continue around circle with each person repeating everyone’s name and information...	Students, professor, Peer Leaders, guest	
5 minutes	Still in circle formation, students count off: 1, 2 Two groups are formed and each has a Peer Leader Chairs need to be moved to form two circles	Students, Peer Leaders	
5 minutes	Two sets of papers are returned -writing about partner – 3 copies (prof., person, partner) -writing about experience Instructions	Prof. Barlow	
10 minutes	Sitting in circle, discussion of reasons of what goes wrong in taking the Writing test, based on what they wrote -Group has Scribe (volunteer or Peer Leader)	Students, Peer Leaders	Newsprint & markers
	Instructor: circulate; watch activity; watch time	Prof. Barlow	
10 minutes	Sitting in circle, discussion of expectations for this class -Group has Scribe (volunteer or Peer Leader)	Students, Peer Leaders	Newsprint & markers
15 mins.	“Debrief” Two reporters from each group explain what the group came up with (experience and expectations). -first reporter explains; other group’s reporter listens and crosses off similar ideas - Reverse order of presentation	Students	Paper, writing instrument
	Closing: Homework assignment?	Prof. Barlow	

Though it would be preferred, in the PSI model, for students to work completely independently at least part of the course, this is not practical when classes meet for an hour and a quarter twice a week and students disperse throughout New York City rather than staying on campus (as they do at a residential college).

The CATW Grading Rubric

The incremental steps are designed to lead students to the point where they can write an essay in response to a 300-500 word prompt, an essay that will meet the criteria of a grading rubric for the CATW test the students must pass. The grading rubric of the CATW provides a chance to adapt the procedures of PSI (also known as the Keller Method) to preparation for the CATW. In conjunction with PLTL principles, PSI can be used to not only gain greater command of the formal aspects of writing necessary for the exam but reinforces the idea of writing as communication, something sometimes lacking in formalistic approaches. Because students will be working directly with trained Peer Leaders—and with each other (a student who has succeeded in one module must bring another student to success before proceeding to the next)—they will be learning to address audiences and enhance impact even as they gain mastery over the elements of each module.

Incorporating Peer Leaders into Class Sessions

The PLTL model in introductory science courses such as chemistry advocates that Peer Leaders are undergraduate students who have recently taken the course, and in practice this may have been in the previous semester. The advantage of selecting students who may be second-semester freshmen is that they are aware of the potential pitfalls for the course they just completed; they also reinforce their own learning of the subject matter by interacting with the students in their workshop group who may approach problem-solving differently than they do.

Two differences were incorporated in this pilot effort. The first was that experienced Peer Leaders were selected – they had led workshop groups in various mathematics courses in prior semesters and were comfortable with facilitating group work, thus comfortable with the process. The second is that they had not led students in developing writing skills, so they too had to understand content (writing skills).

Each week in both semesters the instructors, learning specialist and Peer Leaders met for at least half an hour, up to an hour, to prepare for the workshop sessions. Feedback on what had happened in various group configurations and discussion of individual students' issues were provided to the instructors. This helped create a loop to reinforce students' learning and practice, and modify instructors' activities to help the students. During the preparatory session, the learning specialist provided ideas on facilitation techniques along with discussion between the instructors and Peer Leaders on the content of the class.

Results and Discussion

Conclusions from the fall were quite interesting: of the 15 students who regularly attended and who worked with the stripped-down Keller Method approach (necessitated by lack of resources, especially time for preparation and administration), 14 passed the CATW exam. The six students whose attendance was spotty all failed. In the spring semester, with a weaker class (as determined by CATW scores on previous tests) and a number of students with special needs, Barlow had fewer than nine of his twelve “regulars” pass, with another eight students (all with spotty attendance records) failing.

There is a clear need to free the teacher in the developmental-writing classroom from the pressure to concentrate solely on the test, allowing the teacher to address broader needs. This pressure comes from two sources:

- 1) From the students themselves. They know that their financial-aid clock is ticking and that they have only so many chances to pass the exam. They register and attend this class due to college requirements rather than choice: they don't like being in the class and often believe that anything not clearly related to writing the test is a waste of their time.
- 2) From the institution. Even if the college acknowledges that the data from any individual class or semester can vary for a number of reasons, the passing percentage over a number of semesters does give an indication of the success of the teaching—at least in terms of the number of passing test scores achieved by the students on the test. As cumulative effect the rest of the learning going on over the term is much more difficult to quantify, the pass rate has an outsized importance.

By adding a module to the developmental-writing class that focuses exclusively on the quantifiable skills needed for passing the test, teachers would be able to concentrate on less easily defined critical thinking skills. This two-pronged approach will make students better prepared to pass the test, for the critical-thinking skills will enhance utilization of the quantifiable skills, and the quantifiable skills will make the results of critical thinking more apparent.

For this PLTL program to work, each instructor needs to have all information possible about each of the students. The philosophy is to start where the student is, moving forward in small increments. If the instructor doesn't even *know* where the student is, the process is going to fail. In a classroom with students all starting at different points, it is critical that the right starting point for each student be identified. If a student is feeling lost or unable to proceed from the start, the entire process, the entire class, can be thrown into chaos.

Reflection by Second Instructor

I participated in the PLTL program at NYCCT during the spring semester of 2012. The developmental writing course is geared toward first-year students new to the college who are learning basic writing skills, including grammar, essay structure, and critical thinking.

Because my students were all new students, the Peer Leaders in the classroom offered a model of the maturity and presence accomplished students gain as undergraduates. My students responded particularly well to an introductory name game which helped students bond and open up to each other. Both peer leaders were positive, engaged, and professional in manner, and had the potential to raise the bar for student comportment. Academically, test scores were average; however, the students maintained this average while gaining a better sense of personal growth.

To improve the PLTL program, my feeling is that instructors need more training to make better use of these two assets in the program. Required meetings often focused on ensuring the peer leaders' comfort at the expense of clarifying how I, the instructor, might gain more benefit for the students on the classroom. Ultimately, there are two students who will benefit. The current model focuses on the two peer leaders more than the twenty students. Additionally, instructors should be trained and financially compensated to guarantee the best use of what has the potential to be an effective approach for developmental writing students.

Reflections by Peer Leaders

What follows are journal entries from each of the Peer Leaders, describing class sessions.

The last class, (Lesson 5), was interesting because some students understood what is meant by paraphrasing, while others didn't. I noticed also that some students have a tendency to write very little and much more is required of them on the placement exam. Another interesting occurrence was the frequency with which people in general misuse or misspell frequently misspelled words such as

"alot" and "its". The peer leaders along with the professor brain-stormed with the students to identify the most common mistakes students and adults alike make. Overall it was a productive lesson and the students were very appreciative of the clarifications.

Another Peer Leader wrote:

Three things stood out to me the most today:

1. One student asked Aaron about mid-semester grades. Somehow, that discussion led to him telling us that the partner he worked with today didn't help out as much as the partner from last week. Aaron mentioned to him the reason why we don't pair them with the same person or put them in the same groups week after week.

2. Another student asked an important question which was discussion worthy. He asked, "How could I 'correct' someone's paper when I'm the one that needs the same corrections? He further explained that when he read his partner's essay, he realized how much more his essay could be improved. He said that his partner's essay was better than his. We explained to him that improvement has many layers. Improvement is not just about fixing grammatical errors or correcting misspelled words. It's also about content and suggestions about essay structure, word usage, essay organization...things like that. (It seemed as though he began to feel bad. It was something like that. I would not use the word 'embarrassed'.)

One student said that either his writing or his partner's writing was perfect. Negative. There is always room for improvement.

3. The same student from the previous situation also had an issue about Aaron not grading his essay. (None of the students' essays was graded, by the way.) Aaron explained that if he graded the essays, he felt that the students would see the grade and 'toss' the essay to the side not being bothered with making corrections or improvements. The same student approached us after class inquiring why his essay didn't have a grade. The student explained that if he saw a grade on his paper that he would have a sense of how much work he would need to do to get a higher grade. (He did show some emotion -- expressing dissatisfaction, in my opinion, maybe even slight anger.) We let him know that we were glad he came to us to further inquire about this.

Spring Semester:

Journal from the first session:

What we did --

Icebreaker

First we did the pair icebreaker. I think that this exercise went well. Professor Barlow seemed to have already created a good relationship with the students and most of them seemed quite comfortable with him. The icebreaker gave them a chance to bond with each other and allowed each person to have at least one friend in the class.

Wrote a paragraph

Each person used the information acquired from interviewing his/her partner to create a paragraph, then stood and read it to the class. Naturally, some of the students were a bit hesitant to read their paragraphs. The paragraphs varied in terms of length and content. There was at least one person who was counting the number of sentences to determine whether the paragraph was complete. There was another person who, while reading her paragraph, was doing more explaining than reading, so I think either she was finding it difficult to put her thoughts into words or she

wanted confirmation that what she was saying made sense. I nodded occasionally to make her feel comfortable.

Types of sentences

We split the class into three groups and each group had to define and give an example of the type of sentence that was assigned to them (simple, compound or complex). The groups then shared their responses with the class. One group defined their sentence type in terms of clauses. I know that that is the proper way and I wasn't sure if I should have fished for this type of response from the other groups or if this part was up to discretion of Professor Barlow. Professor Barlow then took an opportunity to generate a mini discussion about the sentence types.

Another thing that I wasn't sure about is whether each group completely understood what the other groups presented.

If I had to change something

For the sentences activity, I would have either

- i) let each group give examples of each type not just the type assigned to them
- ii) write it on the board (at least key words) so that everyone could see
- iii) let each group alter the previous group's sentence so that it is of the type assigned to their group. I think that this could keep them connected to the activity since the sentence would have input from all the groups and they would see how the sentence evolves.

I think that in the future we should use some kind of visual aid such as the chalk board or projector, especially for longer sentences. I do however see potential problems with using this

- i) it will probably take a bit longer
- ii) some students might be nervous about spelling

Impression

I was a bit nervous today because it was my first English workshop and first embedded type workshop, but Professor Barlow was welcoming and I quickly felt comfortable. I think that the emphasis of the first day is supposed to be on the students forming relationships and I think that that was definitely accomplished. We were also able to see the level at which the students are writing.

One Peer Leader worked with both instructors in the spring semester, and commented on variations with mathematics workshops:

The second day of workshop the students wrote about what they had difficulty with in writing, such as grammar, punctuation, run on sentences, etc. Afterwards they were broken up into groups of four where they would share two sentences of their paragraphs in which they thought were their best sentences. The rows of computers seemed like it would be the biggest challenge in group work, but Prof. Sears arranged the students in an arch. I thought the arch within the rows was creative, and effective. The students were able to face each other and discuss their work. We, as peer leaders, walked around, joined the groups and listened to what they had to share. There were a students who said that their problem was that did not know how to use other words, misspelled words, had run-on sentences, were unable to complete the exam in the time allotted. I gave them advice to carry a pocket dictionary and thesaurus and to time themselves once a week by writing a thesis on something they've done in class, using a timer to time themselves 30 minutes.

Reaction

One of the students did say that his problem with writing is that he is lazy. I honestly did not know how to react to that at first, but what I did tell him was "When you want something you work

for it no matter how hard it may be. You have to want to pass to break out of your laziness so you can work hard.” The amount of energy the class has reminded me of a math workshop where students are engaged in completing various problems. I am actually learning English grammar from this class as well. It’s interesting to see how much I really did not know about written English.

The first impression of the class was that students were fairly active. Even though the seating arrangement of the room was not that much appropriate for group works, they seemed to enjoy participating, which is a good omen when it comes to PLTL workshops. After an introduction, We spent most of the class hour for introducing each other and memorizing their names. First, we let them interview and introduce him or her to classmates based on their notes. They seemed to have fun and the atmosphere was also energetic. From my PLTL experience, I have known how important it is to get familiar with their classmates because communicating without reserve is essential to have successful group works. From this point of view, I noticed that name memorizing game was working pretty well. At first, they seemed to feel frustrated a bit to repeat the whole classmates’ names but shortly they got used to it very well.

For the second session, we had students to write a short essay about common grammatical mistakes they make, and started discussion by reading their writing out each other. Most of the students were following the instruction well, but some of them seemed to miss the points. Because they wrote about their feeling when they made mistakes or the difficulties of reading a grammar book rather than their actual grammatical mistakes. And, at this point, I felt there was a need to let them know the importance of following given instructions, especially for analytical writing as an examination.

Issues and Challenges

The difficulty in establishing a program of this nature by individual instructors lies not only in the need for trained Peer Leaders in the classroom, Peer Leaders who must be paid, but also in the significant amount of work necessary in planning and tracking. Unless there is careful layout of individual pathways and subsequent monitoring of progress through them, the program cannot succeed to the full extent possible.

There is much that needs to be done, if this process is to be developed to the point of transferability. The program needs flexibility, information on students, and a great deal of administrative time—in addition to the time spent training and overseeing the Peer Leaders. However, the participants in this small pilot do believe that what they have learned so far warrants continuing this effort on a sustained basis and with adequate administrative support.

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