The Writing Process and Formative Assessment

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Abstract

The writing process has been an integral part of writing pedagogy for many years. However, both students and instructors in some contexts might be resistant to writing through the process approach because it is unfamiliar and seems laborious and time-consuming. Teachers in contexts with large classes might be especially resistant to teaching writing as a process. However, the writing process can be carried out in any context though some adaptation might be needed, depending on the context. Many researchers and instructors have written about the writing process, and many have written about formative assessment. However, these two constructs have generally been considered separately when they actually work in tandem. The purpose of this paper is to explain the process approach to writing pedagogy and how it can be implemented along with ideas and techniques for using formative assessment. The paper starts with an explanation of the product approach and the process approach. Then it explains each stage of the writing process and how it can be carried out in the composition classroom along with formative assessments that can be used at each stage in the writing process.

Keywords: Writing Process, Formative Assessment, Writing Pedagogy, Writing Instruction, Feedback

Introduction

You return an underdeveloped paper to a student and suggest that they might like to look over it again and revise. The student gives you a puzzled look and tells you the paper *is* finished. You wonder why this student has no interest in doing more work on a paper that so obviously needs it, but this is not the first time you have faced a refusal when trying to get a student to revise. Many of your students have no interest in revising their writing, and are seemingly not aware that their writing needs more work. This is coupled with an inability to tackle a revision on their own. What is it in their background that has led them to believe that a piece of writing can be finished in one session? When students are taught to write through a product approach, they learn writing as a one-shot ordeal. They are taught to write a paper, submit it, get a grade, and move on to the next writing task. However, polished writing is rarely achieved in one go. Students need to learn how to write using a process.

In my experience teaching university composition courses in EFL contexts, I found that many of my students were averse to revising their writing assignments. This sort of resistance is rooted in the culture of writing instruction to which they had previously been exposed. While writing practice is important to writing improvement, so is feedback. In fact, Sommers's (2004) research has shown that feedback is one of the most important aspects of helping students learn to write. Product-oriented instruction provides students with minimal, if any, feedback. Some contexts (cultures, countries, institutions) might still approach writing instruction with the goal of having students write a lot rather than helping them improve their writing through a process approach. Tsui (1996), in her now much-cited article, explained her experience of teaching writing as a process in a context focused on a traditional, product-oriented approach to writing instruction. Tsui (1996) ultimately decided that the best approach in her context was a modified process approach. Decisions about pedagogy lie with the instructor but are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they are enacted. Instructors working in contexts that still favor a product orientation could consider how a process approach could improve their students' writing and find methods and strategies of teaching a process that are feasible within that context. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the writing process, explain why the writing process is an important part of writing instruction, and enumerate ways that instructors can provide formative assessment at each stage in the writing process.

The Current-traditional Approach

Before getting into the writing process and process pedagogy, it is important to have an understanding of the current-traditional approach, or current-traditional rhetoric – also sometimes referred to as the product approach (Kroll, 2001). The current-traditional approach earned its name because of its long history in writing pedagogy and because it is still very much in practice (Anson, 2014; Crowley, 1996; Glau, 1999). In essence, the current-traditional approach maintains a focus on instruction geared toward the final written product over the process necessary to achieve it (Anson 2014; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Glau, 1998). The current-traditional approach is often characterized by a literature-based approach to teaching composition whereby students analyze and write about literature (Anson, 2014; Farris, 2014; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014) and emphasizes a focus on grammatical features of language (Berlin, 1987; Farris, 2014; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Glau, 1998). Students are often assigned writing in specific discourse modes, namely EDNA: expository, descriptive, narrative, and argumentative (Berlin, 1987; Farris, 2014; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Glau, 1998) and expected to diligently follow certain rhetorical conventions, such as the five-paragraph essay with introduction, conclusion, and three body paragraphs (Berlin, 1987; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). The current-traditional approach often uses model texts (frequently by professional writers) that students are expected to study and then imitate to some degree in their writing (Anson, 2014; Glau, 1998; Richards, 2015). In the current-traditional approach, feedback on student work is often limited to a final grade and marginal or end comments (Anson, 2014).

The Process Approach

In the sixties and seventies, a paradigm shift in writing instruction came about with the emergence of the process approach. The biggest change from the current-traditional paradigm to the process paradigm was a shift in focus from written product to a focus on both product and process (Anson, 2014; Nation, 2009), i.e., in the process approach, students are provided with steps and strategies that lead from blank page to final product. Although there is no one exact framework for the process approach, there are certain features that characterize it (Graham & Perin, 2007; Nagin, 2006; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). In the process approach, writers carry out cycles of planning, writing, and revising. Other common features of process pedagogy include an awareness of audience, context-dependent writing, and student-centered teaching (Carter, Miller, & Penrose, 1998). Students' ownership of their own texts is stressed, as is reflection and feedback (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). While this paper outlines a process approach, it is important to understand that there is no one exact process (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014) i.e., each writer has their own process, and each writing instructor might approach the task of teaching the writing process differently.

Generally, the steps of the writing process are outlined as prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publication although names of the steps and the number of steps vary. The writing process is not strictly linear whereby one step always neatly follows the other. In fact, the writing process is usually recursive (Anson, 2014; Harmer, 2004; Lassonde & Richards, 2013; Nation, 2009; Perl, 2008; Richards, 2015) and it is important for writing teachers to help students understand this. For instance, although prewriting is the first step, planning often takes places through the entire process as the writer discovers new ideas and different ways of approaching a task, and revision often takes place continuously as a writer drafts. Although the process approach has been supplanted by other composition and writing theories, marking a social turn in writing studies and instruction, all writing is necessarily produced by some sort of process, and all students should be introduced to writing as a process.

Why Teach the Writing Process?

Most writers do not produce a polished piece of writing the first time they draft, and, in fact, most writers go through numerous revisions before they have a finished piece (Downs, 2016; Perl, 2008; Yan, 2005). Teaching writing as a process can help build confidence and reduce writing anxiety (Bayat, 2014). Product approaches can lead students to falsely believe that they must produce a polished piece of writing the first time they write a draft. For some students, this belief makes writing a painful experience when they cannot immediately produce what they had envisioned (Perl, 2008). Writing is often much improved when writers create several drafts influenced by reflection and feedback (Downs, 2016). Additionally, guiding students through the writing process can help prevent plagiarism (Hamlin, 2011). Students might plagiarize because they see what good writing looks like (often through model texts or reading assignments), but have not developed a composition process, so they borrow from already published texts. Perhaps, however, the most significant reason to teach the writing process is its potential application for future writing tasks, whether those tasks are for academic or other purposes. It is not possible or even desirable to prepare students to write in every possible genre or rhetorical mode they might need in the future. However, writing instructors can teach students a writing process, a skill that can be applied to any or all future writing tasks. Research on the effects of the writing process has shown positive results. In a meta-analysis of studies on the process approach, Graham and Sandmel (2011) found that the process approach improved the overall quality of writing of students in general education classes, and in her research, Susanti (2013) found that students who had learned to compose using a writing process had a significant increase in the quality of their writing over students who had not been introduced to the writing process.

What Is Formative Assessment?

Understanding formative assessment requires first understanding summative assessment. Summative assessment is assessment of learning, ending with a grade that counts, often at the end of an assignment or course (Benjamin, 2008; Brown & Abedywickrama, 2018). For writing assignments, summative assessment typically means a score on a written assignment (Benjamin, 2008). Formative assessment, in contrast, is assessment for learning; formative assessment is ungraded feedback that lets students know what they have done well and gives them guidance on what they can do to improve. Formative assessments are not only beneficial for students however, they are also important for teachers as they inform instructional changes (Benjamin, 2008; Brown & Abedywickrama, 2018; Nation, 2009; Overmeyer, 2009). Formative assessment in writing can take many forms and might be carried out by the teacher, peers, or fellow student writers (Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2011). A review of the research on formative assessment in writing instruction has shown that formative assessment improves student writing (Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2011).

Stages of the Writing Process and Formative Assessment Activities

The prewriting stage of the writing process

Prewriting activities are designed to help writers generate ideas and get them down on paper. According to Graham and Perin (2007), prewriting activities have a positive impact on writing. In particular, English language learners benefit from direct instruction of planning activities and methods (Lassonde & Richards, 2013).

During a prewriting exercise, students should be encouraged to come up with as many unedited ideas as possible. One of the best ways to help students learn how to prewrite is to model prewriting exercises. Modeling can come in the form of doing exercises together as a class (works well with brainstorming), or the instructor can do exercises at the same time as the students (works well with freewriting). Each writer is different, and each writer plans differently (Lassonde & Richards, 2013); instead of expecting students to use certain planning activities for certain writing tasks or to plan the same way for every writing task, it is better to introduce students to a variety of methods for planning and let them decide which ones work best for them (Lassonde & Richards, 2013). This does not have to be done all at once. Different prewriting exercises can be introduced throughout a course. It is important, however, that students understand that there are many different ways to plan a writing task.

Prewriting activities

Some types of pre-writing activities are more generative, designed to bring forth a rush of ideas, such as brainstorming and freewriting, while others have more control and organization, such as graphic organizers or outlines. Because of this, it can be beneficial to guide students in doing a generative prewriting activity before putting writing into the mold of an outline or graphic organizer. For some students, starting with an outline or graphic organizer could inhibit the process of planning rather than fostering it.

Freewriting

Freewriting means writing down everything that comes to mind without concern for errors or the production of a coherent text. Freewriting can be completely open or focused on a particular topic. When introducing freewriting, it is important to emphasize writing without stopping. When stuck for ideas, writers can write sentences such as *I cannot think of anything to write* until ideas come to mind. When students freewrite in class, give them a set amount of time. For writers not familiar with freewriting, start with three to five minutes and later increase the time.

Example of a focused freewriting exercise

Topic: Community service

Community service. What does it really mean? Our teachers and parents say that it is important. Maybe they are right, but what kind of community service is good? I guess there are many different kinds of community service, like working at a homeless shelter, volunteering at an animal shelter, or maybe some other kinds of service. Ah… what else do I want to say? It's something about the right kind of community service… Of course, community service must be about helping the community in some way, but sometimes you wonder if what you do for community service is really helping. If I volunteer to do a park clean-up, I wonder if that is really helping or whether that work would be recognized by anyone. I guess that, the most important part of community service is to find a project that I feel is helping and something that I like to do.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming means to list all ideas that come to mind about a particular topic. Ideas can be written in the form of words, phrases or sentences, or a combination. The emphasis is on getting ideas on paper rather than the form they take. Like freewriting, brainstorming should be quick and uncensored. Brainstorming can also be done very effectively in groups, whereby students share their ideas about a topic and one member of the group writes them down. Tsui (1996) reported that students greatly benefited from the synergy of group brainstorming – even over whole class brainstorming.

<u>Example of a brainstorming exercise</u>

Topic: Why I want to study abroad

List:

- Interact with different cultures
- Improve language skills
- See life from a different perspective
- Meet people from different countries
- Might help me get into graduate school
- Become a global citizen

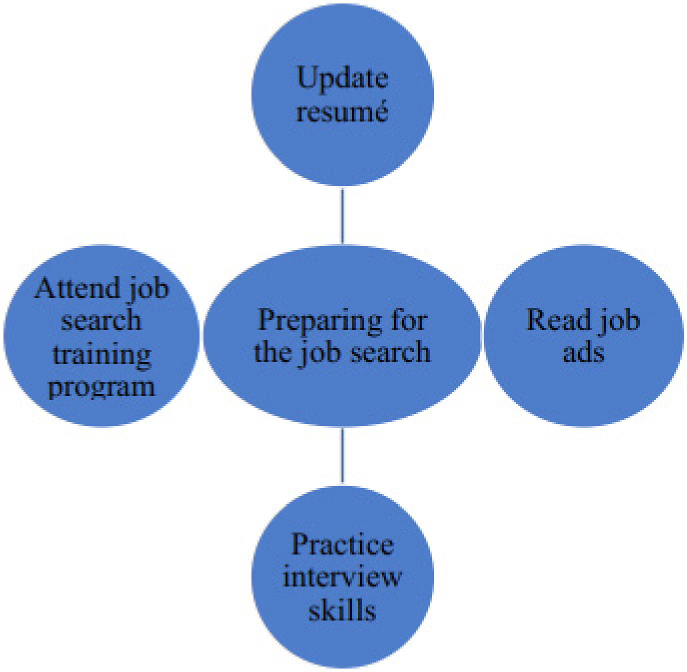
Recording Ideas

Richards and Miller (2005) suggested allowing students to record ideas on a device (such as a phone or computer). Recording ideas can be especially useful for students who have difficulty writing quickly enough to get ideas on paper. If needed, lower-proficiency students can record their ideas in their native language so they do not forget them. As they listen, students can select and rearrange their ideas (Richards & Miller, 2005). Recording can also be done for group brainstorming activities.

Graphic Organizers

A graphic organizer is a structure that helps writers visualize and organize their content. Graphic organizers are often simple drawings with lines and circles that students fill in with their ideas. You can show students graphic organizers by writing them on the board and having students copy them in their notebooks or providing them with handouts with graphic organizers.

Sample graphic organizer



Outlining

An outline is a linear structure of a piece of writing consisting only of main points.

Example:

Topic: Exercise has many important benefits.

A. Can prevent health problems
    1. Helps maintain proper blood pressure
    2. Decreases risk of heart disease and diabetes
    3. Can help skin health
B. Makes people happier
    1. Helps relieve anxiety and stress
    2. Can prevent feelings of depression
    3. Fosters a positive outlook
C. Promotes fitness
    1. Helps maintain a healthy weight
    2. Builds and maintains strong bones and muscles
    3. Improves strength and endurance

It is important that students understand they are not obligated to follow the information from any sort of prewriting activity faithfully. They should understand that it is normal to alter and change ideas as they draft. While graphic organizers and outlines can provide a useful framework for developing a piece of writing, they are guides, not templates that must be adhered to. Personal experiences have shown that some writing teachers deduct points for outlines that do not match drafts exactly. However, this sort of rigidity is counterproductive to teaching the writing process. Many writers make changes to their writing after they start drafting, and outlines are often different from drafts, sometimes substantially so.

Formative Assessment Following a Prewriting Activity

After a prewriting activity, assessment should be broad and open with the focus on whether students were able to generate a range of ideas (Benjamin 2008). If students had difficulty coming up with enough ideas, suggest revisiting a preliminary prewriting activity or doing some research on the given topic. In some cases, it might be important to suggest a topic change. Conversation can be invaluable at this point. Through discussion with a peer or peers, students might be able to narrow down some of their ideas or find out which ones hold the most interest for them. These discussions can be rather free in nature, whereby students simply talk about the ideas generated during the prewriting exercise, or students can read their prewriting exercises to a peer or peers who respond.

Teachers can model how they would use a prewriting activity to narrow down their ideas. For example, students can be shown a piece of freewriting done by the teacher and the changes made to it. Teachers may also model a "think aloud" process to show how they make decisions before starting a draft.

<u>Example of the "think aloud" process</u>

On second thought, I don't think number of shopping centers is relevant to the topic of quality of life in a big city. I'm not so sure the number of parks really has an impact. But high cost of living, crime rates, bad traffic – those seem really important. I think those are my main supporting details.

Drafting

In the drafting stage, students produce a first draft from their prewriting exercise. At this stage, the focus is on creating a complete piece of writing, not a finished work. When drafting, writers should not be too concerned about errors. For most writers, early drafts are often awkward pieces of writing that improve with revision. Proficient writers understand that good writing is rewriting, but often novice writers do not (MacArthur, 2013; MacArthur, 2016; Nation, 2009). Students who are used to a product-oriented approach will need encouragement and direction for understanding that a first draft is a beginning and that further changes can be made in subsequent stages (Harmer, 2004). Although drafting is mentioned as one stage in the writing process, in fact, drafting can, and often should, happen multiple times at different stages in the writing process. The number of drafts might be determined by the writing task. An email might need one revision, but a research paper might call for numerous revisions. At this point in the writing process, showing students sample drafts for the genre they are writing in can be useful. These samples could come from drafts written by students in previous courses, drafts that the teachers themselves have written, or sample drafts from a textbook. Showing samples of drafts can help students understand that a draft is not a finished piece of writing.

Formative Assessment after Drafting

At this stage, formative assessment often focuses on the macro-features of writing, such as content, organization, and development of ideas. Feedback at this stage is not meant to result in a polished piece of writing but is intended to move the writing forward to the next step in the writing process (Benjamin, 2008). Though the focus is generally on big-picture feedback following a draft, at this stage, teachers might want to point out a couple of patterns of language errors that students can attend to during their revision (Ferris, 2011). Doing so can be effective in helping students improve grammatical accuracy over time. Post-drafting formative assessments can be realized by teacher feedback, classmate feedback (peer-editing), or author feedback (self-editing) (Benjamin, 2008; Nation, 2009). Ideally, the instructor would use all three forms of feedback for each assignment, but, in reality, this is often cumbersome. The instructor might take into account students' proficiency levels and preferences when deciding which feedback types to utilize, or, for each assignment, the instructor might use one form or a combination of two. Benjamin (2008) recommends working in thirds, whereby the class is split into three groups, each group getting one form of assessment. For instance, group A gets teacher feedback; group B does peer feedback; group C does self-editing. For each assignment, the form of feedback is rotated so that students have different kinds of feedback on their drafts and get teacher feedback on a third of their assignments (Benjamin, 2008).

Conferencing

Conferencing is a useful method for giving feedback on a draft. Some of the murkiness in a writer's draft or the vagueness of teacher-written comments can become clearer when student and teacher meet face-to-face (Bean, 2011; Ferris, 2011; Ferris, 2014; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014; Maliborska & You, 2016). In fact, conferencing might be more useful than written feedback (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014; MacArthur, 2013; MacArthur, 2016; Hyland, 2003) and more efficient (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014) as it can reduce the time needed for writing margin and end comments. Conferences should be interactive, whereby both student and teacher speak (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Nation, 2009). Prior to conferencing with students, instructors should read over the assignments and be ready to talk about them. It might be helpful to make a few notes while reading. To help students prepare for a conference, Jackson (2013) and Nation (2009) recommend giving students a list of questions. (See sample below.) If individual conferences are difficult due to large class sizes and time constraints, consider holding group conferences of four to five students. In a group conference, focus on common issues that were noticed when reading drafts (Bean, 2011; Hyland, 2003). At the end of a conference, students should have a clear idea of what they will do next to move their writing forward (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014; Hyland, 2003; Jackson, 2013; Nation, 2009).

Sample list of useful expressions for conferences

Expressing difficulty
I'm having difficulty/trouble with _____.
I'm not sure how to _____.

Expressing doubts
I'm not sure about _____.
What do I need to improve?
Do I need to cut/add anything from this piece of writing?
Did I follow the assignment correctly?

Getting help
How can I get more help with my writing?
Where can I find more information on ______?

Editing

In the editing stage, a piece of writing is corrected for surface errors, such as spelling, mechanics, and grammatical issues. This does not mean, however, that every error should be corrected. Generally, in a course that is focused on helping students improve their writing, favor selective error correction, which attends to a few errors at a time over comprehensive error correction, which attends to all errors in a piece of writing. Comprehensive error correction can be counterproductive: It can be exhausting for the teacher and overwhelming for the student (Ferris, 2011). There are writing tasks and written products, of course, that need comprehensive error correction, such as an essay for university application or a resume. Additionally, for some assignments, teachers might want students to understand the importance of careful editing of the entire piece of writing (Ferris, 2011) and, therefore, will employ comprehensive error correction, but for most assignments, selective error correction is preferable. Correction codes and mini-guides can be used to help students locate and correct errors. With a correction code or mini-guide, teachers can point out errors, but the students themselves do the work to figure out the mistakes and make corrections. Students can work on their corrections alone or get help from resources such as writing center tutors and peers.

Correction Code

A correction code is a collection of symbols that represent common errors. For example, s-v means subject-verb agreement error, v-t means a problem with verb tense. When using a correction code, teachers underline the error and write the code above it. Before marking student papers with a correction code, a training session may be conducted where students are given the correction code to be used throughout the course and a paper with errors. Students should locate the errors and mark them with appropriate symbols.

Sample correction code

s-v	subject-verb agreement
v-t	verb tense
p	punctuation
wo	wrong word order
prep	problem with a preposition
cap	capitalize
lc	lowercase

Mini-guide

A mini-guide can be created to help students proofread their drafts. A mini-guide is based on the common errors students make and includes rules and examples. In the editing stage, students check their work against the guide and make corrections. The mini-guide can be adapted and updated as the course progresses (Hess, 2001).

Sample Mini-guide

Rule: Capitalize the pronoun *I*.
Example: When I went to the store, I took my handbag.
Rule: Capitalize the names of languages.
Example: I want to study English, French, and Chinese.
Rule: Capitalize the first word of a sentence.
Example: We will leave at five today.

(Truncated mini-guide, adapted from an idea by Hess, 2001, p. 104)

The Publication Stage

In the writing process, publication means that a final product is presented to an audience of some sort (Bayat, 2014; Benjamin, 2008). Some possible forms of publication are books of student writing, class newspapers or magazines, videos of students reading their writing, student blogs or other online publications, posters of student writing displayed on classroom walls, or students reading their writing in small groups or to the class. Although publication suggests finality, all writers are continuously learning. Publication of student work not only serves to motivate; it can also help students with ideas and direction for future writing when they see how their classmates approached a writing task.

Formative Assessment Following Publication

Feedback following publication is feedback for future writing. At this stage, the focus is on content (Benjamin, 2008). As with other forms of feedback, it is important to provide students with guidance so that they have direction for providing feedback. This can be with a structure – a rubric, a checklist, or guided questions – and can be executed in written or oral form or both. The focal points for this formative assessment were likely already covered in previous assessments; e.g., if the assignment focused on a persuasive essay, then the focal points in the formative assessment following publication will still relate to the important elements of a persuasive essay.

<u>Sample formative assessment structure for published writing</u>

The writer's position is clearly stated. _____ Yes _____ No
The writer gave sufficient support. _____ Yes _____ No
The writer's arguments were convincing. _____ Yes _____ No
From this piece of writing, I learned _____.
What I like most about this piece of writing was ______.
The questions I have for the writer are _____.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined the steps of the process approach and formative assessments that can be used following each step in the process. I believe that teaching writing as a process is important for students' future academic and professional writing. It is important to keep in mind that there is no one exact process and that each individual writer will develop their own unique process. Nonetheless, because of the many benefits of the process approach, helping students develop process-writing skills is an important part of writing pedagogy that writing instructors need to enact. Process writing can help students no matter what type of writing tasks or assignments they might have in the future as it is applicable to any kind of writing. Teachers of large classes might have to think differently about how they organize their classes (classes, lessons, curriculum), but the process approach can be carried out in any writing classroom.

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