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Current Writing Attitudes and Practices in Selected Adult Literacy Programs in Western Canada

Background

In developing and providing professional development (PD) activities for adult literacy (AL) coordinators and volunteer tutors in Western Canada, we have become interested in how writing is viewed and used. Of special interest to us are practices and views about writing as a means to greater self-awareness. Our interest and our own convictions on the subject arise from experience in the Camrose Write to Learn AL project (Morgan, 1998), where personal growth is an outcome we have repeatedly seen from writing in a supportive environment (Morgan, 1997). We have come to regard introspective and reflective writing as critical to the long-term personal success of literacy program participants, and this outlook is reflected in the PD we hope to develop and share with other AL workers.

To test some of our assumptions about the writing attitudes and practices of others, and to guide our PD planning, we recently conducted a survey of selected literacy programs on the following issues:

1. *Writing attitudes and activities,* especially regarding practices such as *shared writing* as a means of personal growth among all participants, including instructors and administrators. Shared writing involves all participants regularly writing together, reading and hearing each other's work read aloud in a group setting, and occasionally collecting material for publication. Shared writing is a core element of the Write to Learn PD model and is similar in purpose to "process writing" (Reuys, 1992) and "lifewriting" (Butler & Bentley, 1992).

2. *PD needs as perceived by potential participants.* To help our PD planning, we wanted an indication of the needs perceived by potential participants, and of other attitudes and practices that might be recognized by practitioners themselves as narrow, restrictive, or obsolescent (Malicky & Norton, 1998).

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Deborah Morgan has worked in the field of adult literacy for 13 years. Her belief in the importance of writing led to the development of the Write to Learn Project. She is currently traveling with students from the Project conducting "fearless writing" workshops for students and instructors in literacy programs across Canada. Her e-mail address is Deborah_Morgan@aaal.ab.ca.

The Study

Focus, Sample, and Methods

The survey was intended to sample the writing practices and views in AL programs in Western Canada. The focus of the study was what literacy practitioners actually did with writing, their levels of satisfaction and confidence with their practices, and their stated PD needs.

We selected 50 programs intentionally from among those AL programs we believed handled the teaching and use of writing creatively. As a result, we believed our results would reflect the best basic writing practices in literacy programs in the region.

Two methods were used in the study: a telephone interview and a Delphi-style computer conference with eight participants and five iterations over about a four-week period.

Findings

Participants and Programs

The largest group of participants (about a third) was from Alberta, with rural and urban programs equally represented. Programs ranged in average age from 10 years (Alberta) to two years (NWT), and in size from over 80 students (Saskatchewan) to 10 (NWT). Most programs (27) reported they had not changed in size since the previous year, but 12 reported growth, and four were smaller.

Participants included coordinators (57%), instructors (35%), and tutors (8%), with many performing more than one role.

Program Activities

More than three quarters of the writing in these programs consisted of three types of activities: spelling and grammar drills and skills (35%); personal stories and letters (28%); and journal writing (15%).

Three other findings of interest were: one third to one half of total program instructional time was spent on writing; less than 20% of writing involved computers; one-to-one tutoring was the most common form of instruction (50%), with classroom (32%) and small group instruction (18%) forming the other half.

Participants' Views on Teaching Writing

Participants were asked to comment on and rate their satisfaction with various aspects of the writing program.

Satisfaction was lowest in regard to access to inservice opportunities, time available for teaching writing, and preparation time.

In regard to *attitudes* toward writing, tutors accepted the value of writing as a component of a basic literacy program, but they were not confident about their own writing skills and did not believe their own writing training had adequately prepared them to teach others to write. Tutors believed students often lacked confidence as writers and were often fearful of writing, but some observed that in time and with proper support students could become both more skilled and more comfortable with writing.

The eight Delphi participants enthusiastically confirmed views about the potential of writing as a tool for self-development. Their experience had con-

vinced them that writing in a supportive environment could increase participants' understanding of their lives:

> Crises shrink on the page. Regular journal writing can be meditative. And "medicative" too—good medicine.

> Self-perception [occurs] in a way that may not have been possible without the writing process. *

Summary and implications for PD

Our overall objective in this study was to determine attitudes and practices in AL writing programs, and to infer PD needs. We concluded:

- Tutors and coordinators wish to improve and vary their teaching and use of writing. They are open to alternatives to the dry study of grammar and workbook exercises.
- Currently, although writing is not generally used for reflection or as a means of self-discovery in the AL programs we surveyed, some do use shared-writing strategies and are enthusiastic about the results. Tutors do not hesitate to admit lacking training, experience, and ideas in this area.
- PD that provides usable ideas on the teaching of writing for self-discovery, which increases the preparation and confidence of tutors, would be warmly received.
- Despite practitioners' dissatisfactions and insecurities, writing currently receives its fair share of attention in most literacy programs (up to one half of program time).
- Although the predominant model in teaching writing is one-to-one tutoring, there is currently a significant element of large-group (classroom) work. Small-group ("writing circle") activity accounts for less than a fifth of total writing time.
- Computers play a minor role in these programs, with an average of less than 20% of writing time involving a computer and 36% of programs reporting no student use of computers at all.

References

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