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# **Can a Leopard Change Its Spots? A Personal Account**

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## **In the Beginning**

As a teacher, I always thought that students showed an antipathy toward writing simply because they were frustrated by the grammatical problems that curbed their thinking path and their inability to express themselves. I often related their incompetence to master grammatical structures to their low motivation in self-learning and inattentiveness to correction work. Upon marking students' assignments, I spotted the grammatical errors and faulty expressions and rephrased the confused patterns. Provocative remarks were often made on the students' tasks to vent my dissatisfaction at their messy performances. In writing lessons, I played the role of an authoritarian figure by designing the lesson into a semi-instructional one. Students were apprehensive about seeking help from the teacher. I seldom monitored to see what they needed as I thought it was time for students to contribute and display what they had learned without the teacher's involvement of any kind. Writing was only regarded as testing. The writing lessons were disciplined and there was neither sharing between teacher and students nor among students themselves. I didn't derive pleasure from the lessons at all. I was eager to seek a "breakthrough" in my teacher career.

## **In Training**

I underwent a training course designed for the teaching of process writing organized by the principal investigator, Dr. Martha C. Pennington, assisted by the trainer, Marie Cheung of Hong Kong City Polytechnic. I worked in a team of 8 members. The training lasted for a duration of 5 months beginning in August 1992. During this time, a process approach was adopted in the writing programme to help my class of Form 3 students to discover the meaning of writing. A meeting was held once a month on training how to apply and practise process writing in the L2 classroom. In the course of training, workshops concerning the sharing of resources and experiences were arranged to review the research progress and reactions of students in each process approach cycle. Valuable feedback was also given as the trainer paid three class visits to my school.

In the implementation stage, process writing was conducted in 3 lesson cycles (about 6 or 7 lessons each). Every cycle represented a full range of writing processes

and included several procedures. In each writing process cycle, various types of activities were adopted and modified to meet the needs of the students and the design of each process approach cycle had a certain degree of likeness to serve this purpose.

The first lesson started off with written brainstorming to generate ideas on a topic from students under a time constraint. It was intended to develop their skill in concentrated writing and capturing any instant thinking in this speedy and brief writing process. It was ensued by "fastwriting" on a particular topic to train students to think divergently about a subject and to formulate ideas in complete sentences. Then peer discussion occurred in which students were provided an opportunity to share ideas and give positive comments on each others' work. Discussion guidelines for the fastwrites and drafts were handed out to facilitate the discussion and keep the students on track.

In order to help students evolve meaning, develop, and elaborate ideas, they wrote 2 drafts to discover their new intentions and purpose and to clarify what had been scribbled across the drafts. The first draft was written in the second lesson, and was followed by peer discussion and conferencing (more on this later). In the third and fourth lessons, the students worked on supplementary worksheets on organizational structures or devices of discourse (e.g. coherence, idea linking, paragraphing etc.) and grammar (e.g. tenses, pronouns, agreement of subject and verb, etc.). These activities served as input to expose students to rich resources and writing techniques. The second draft was a home assignment to be submitted on the following day. Students then exchanged their drafts for peer discussion. Coupled with this was teacher conferencing. Then, I collected the second draft for review, giving constructive comments on each individual draft.

In the fifth and sixth lessons, the students completed a supplementary worksheet on common errors made in the drafts and then a class discussion was held to elucidate problems and give feedback on all students' performances. In writing the final product, students concentrated on editing and proofreading as a means of self-monitoring.

On receiving the final products, the teacher marked them by giving her compliments and inspiring remarks rather than negative criticism. The marking scheme was based on the range and accuracy of grammatical structures, vocabulary and complexity of sentence structure, and organization of content. The assignments were graded according to the effort and improvement students made in different stages of the writing process. As follow-up, well-presented assignments were read aloud in class for appreciation. Some of the outstanding creations were posted on a class display-board for exhibition.

Of all the activities involved, the most effective ones were peer discussion and conferencing. In peer discussion, students were divided into pairs or groups, where

they responded to spelling, grammar, and clarity of expression. Students generally realized the change of role from a writer to a competent reader. They tried to express themselves in the negotiation to get ideas across to their peers. They asserted that they could learn about the merits and demerits of a piece of writing and the techniques in reading it critically. They perceived the vast importance of reviewing their own work and became more alert to their own inaccuracies. Examining the others' work stimulated their own thinking, too, they remarked. In peer discussion, I played the part of a facilitator, supervisor, and advisor, intending to narrow down the social distance between myself and the students.

The other successful activity was conferencing. While students were performing the revising task or engaging in peer discussion, some were called upon individually, in pairs, or in groups, to engage in a teacher-student conference. They were reminded to prepare before attending it so that the conference could be fully-exploited under the time constraints. I imparted feedback mainly on the length, clarity, organization, development, completeness of ideas, and the choices of words. I started by praising the credits of the draft and then discussing the vague points regarding the purpose of the students and to clarify ambiguous ideas. I endeavored to guide students in areas of grammar as well. Then I invited them to rephrase their ideas and ended with encouraging comments. In fact, I found conferencing to be a most effective teaching technique when students who had initiated the work could talk about how they had chiseled it out in their own unique way. Rather than controlling students' meaning in the text, the teacher plays the roles of consultant and mentor to establish a collaborative relationship with students. Through such conferencing, the teacher discovers the underlying intention and logic of students' texts and helps them reshape and modify the writing until the true meaning articulates itself intelligibly.

Out of curiosity, you may inquire, "Don't you feel exhausted with every minute in the lesson being occupied by students seeking help to tackle more or less the same problems? It was undeniable that I did encounter this typical dilemma. Conferencing is an extremely arduous task. Though students learned much from the negotiation and took initiative in making changes or corrections in regard to my advice, the only knotty point was that I was totally exhausted. I began to doubt my own persistence and the efficacy of conferencing in terms of my energy, classroom time, and the number of students being conferenced.

However, as I apprehended the close resemblance of most of the content of discussion among students, I decided that it would be more economical to do some preliminary tasks prior to conferencing. I collected all the students' drafts and detected the shared aspects of problem areas for giving feedback to all students in a class discussion. Among the drafts collected, two drafts were selected and copies of them were made for the whole class. In the class discussion, various techniques were

employed to introduce certain reviewing skills. I used the discussion guidelines to structure the content of the discussion and to guide the students to read the chosen drafts critically. Students were to focus on one discussion question and to review one or two paragraphs at a time. To begin with, I commented on the organization and development of the draft. Then I asked the students to take the reader's role cognitively while reading. I also invited the students to guess the intended meaning of the wrong verbs and words in relation to the context and to find appropriate alternative expressions to substitute for them. Finally, I directed the students to expand the content by introducing several examples. Then I moved on to dealing with certain linguistic aspects for the clarity of description. After the discussion, students tended to have a clearer understanding as to what they should review and monitor in their own drafts.

Since the global problems had been settled, students who then attended the conference could voice their own problems on a more individualized basis. While conferencing was underway, I pointed out some vague expressions and structural problems arising from an individual's draft and asked the student for further elaboration. At the same time, the other students present at the conference were also involved in giving their suggestions and viewpoints. The role of the teacher was to formulate stimulating cues and clues to direct students to liberate and voice their thoughts with confidence, and to encourage interaction, collaboration and sharing of ideas among students in solving a problem that might be similar to their own. Though only a few paragraphs of each draft could be studied and discussed intensively, because of the tight schedule, students found conferencing an extremely valuable source of communication with the teacher and the classmates.

### **In the Final Analysis**

Upon reading the final products at the end of the 3 cycles of the writing programme, most students had distinctly improved in their writing skill. The final draft exhibited their obvious attempts to work towards an essay of a better quality and most of the major errors made in the previous written tasks had been removed. I was gratified with the final products as they evinced abundant variations and creativity across drafts. I saw the powerful effect of highly motivated discussions, adequate input, multiple drafting, fruitful peer discussion and conferencing—all forms of scrupulous guidance in assisting students to create a fine-tailored product.

In the implementation process, I also took note of the transformed attitudes of both the students and myself towards writing and teaching writing. Students no longer found writing lessons a headache to them. They were proud of being a critical but supportive reader for their peers. Their seriousness in writing was in sharp contrast to the light-hearted manner in the past and they became more confident and

independent writers. They were exultant that their viewpoints were accepted despite the grammatical errors. In addition, students accepted the fact that multiple drafting was essential to insure a better quality product. As more and more drafts were done, students developed the ability to initiate, develop, and revise better ideas in each writing stage. They learned to restructure the ideas recurrently in order to get the message across to the reader. Together, they plied the oar towards an objective and an audience, in order to accomplish a refined piece of writing.

As for myself, I discerned that drafting was central in the process approach. Indeed, it was almost impossible to demand a desirable product without its being planned and drafted carefully ahead. Likewise, it was ascertained that sharing ideas with one another in peer discussion was conducive to better creation and self-direction on the part of students. I had been over-worried about their intention to copy from others while exchanging their drafts for reviewing. But in fact, the value of peer discussion much outweighed the possibility of replication. Moreover, the comments given by the teacher were highly-motivating to students, as they signified the recognition of the efforts made by them. As I reexamined my own marking scheme of the past, I realized that I only counted grammar mistakes when grading a product, disregarding the writer's efforts made in the writing process.

As a great incongruity with the past, students savoured the inviting, lively and relaxing learning climate and environment in the writing lessons. In addition, there was a great change in my teaching attitude as well. I disengaged myself from my desk and heaps of books, and monitored the classroom, ensuring my availability in the students' vicinity in case they needed help. I recognized my assistance was essential in the students' writing process. I lifted my authoritarian mask and played the role of a companion in their discussion, accepting their ideas, giving reassurance and appraisal at appropriate times, bridging the social gap through conferencing with them, and giving suitable advice when necessary. I began to take pleasure in the writing lessons as less time was spent on preparing the lesson and marking and yet I could involve both the teacher and students in the writing process and the amelioration of the writing product was both remarkable and encouraging.

Finally, I would like to make some recommendations for adopting the process approach in teaching writing. In light of what I experienced, the effectiveness of the process approach depends on a lot of factors. Among these, it is clear that the teacher is a crucial factor in determining the extent of its success. Teachers must understand thoroughly the characteristics of their students and adjust the process approach to meet their needs. On the other hand, I discovered that many students have very limited resources and vocabulary and they have a habit of relying on the teacher's input. How can we as teachers help them build this "resource bank"? I believe extensive reading under a teacher's guidance should be encouraged. It is also

significant to notice that writing regularly every day is the most effective resolution to the writing problem. Ideally, the variety of writing tasks adopted will range from small paragraphs and short essays, to reports and journals.

On the other hand, it has been a “breakthrough” to have tried process approach on a large class. In regard to the experimentation, well-designed activities can ensure maximum participation of each student in the learning process and adequate teacher attention can, to a large extent, be evenly distributed to each student. For instance, in peer discussion, the discussion guidelines given to students facilitated their draft-reviewing process with the whole class being kept on the right track and following an explicit direction. Moreover, conferencing with pairs or groups of students proved to be suitable for large classes. In addition, the discussion of common errors on a class basis was noted as both a natural and effective way of learning, since students could be aware of their own mistakes in the most convenient way and have them eliminated in advance of the conferencing stage.

Furthermore, we must not neglect how fascinating the mixed role of a teacher is. You could never imagine how much more a teacher, acting as a facilitator and a mentor, can achieve in helping students to cultivate their own potentials. The demand for individual attention is so pressing that we should respond to our students generously and patiently. Apart from this, students must also be educated in the importance of drafting. The effort students make in the drafts reflects how hard they work to get their meaning across to their audience. The drafts, therefore, should be commented on positively to help them realize how much the teacher cares about and appreciates the effort they have put in to the writing process.

To conclude with the last, but not the least point, the value of journal writing cannot be forgotten. As a matter of fact, asking students to keep journals regularly is an extremely constructive method to allow them to mirror and re-echo their suggestions and attitudes towards both teaching and learning. In this way, teachers can take responsive measures upon the students’ reactions while students can also review their learning process in order to devise appropriate learning strategies accordingly.

### **In a Nutshell**

In a nutshell, the process approach is a positive writing practice that can be applied to the learning situation in Hong Kong. Since it does not have an absolutely fixed and pre-determined nature, there is great flexibility in performing it. Teachers could implement the approach in their class of students while respecting their different characteristics, needs, learning attitudes, levels of intelligence, academic ability, and learning potential. It is crucial to notice that the persistence of both the teacher and students in working on the process approach requires much patience and

devotion in their trust to its feasibility to help the students. We need to do much convincing of students because the effects of the process approach itself are not immediate.

As for myself, it is by experiencing this research that I have realized the need to change my attitude towards teaching writing. And it is through the journey of this exploration of the process approach that I have rooted out the key to a locked door—that is, my responsibilities of being a teacher. Regarding the students' unsatisfactory performance in writing, it is unfair to lay the blame solely on their being idle, passive, incompetent, unintelligent, and irresponsible. It is in fact, the responsibility of the teacher to play the role of advisor and mentor in guiding the students, directing them to realize their own responsibilities of being a reader as well as a writer, and to discover the mirth and felicity of writing and sharing their ideas with other people.

### **About the Author**

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