

Qualitative Research on the Using of Writing Workshop Techniques in English Writing Class

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Abstract—How to improve the English writing ability is always considered to be a very difficult task by the teachers and students. While many different methods have been tried by the teachers, this essay presents the result of a qualitative research done in University of Denver in America, which verifies the function of writing workshop and the effect of its use in the writing class in terms of developing the students' writing skills and improving the students' writing competence. Besides, the article also elaborates on the writing workshop techniques employed by the professors of the University of Denver in their creative writing classes.

Index Terms—qualitative research, English writing class, writing workshop, techniques

I. INTRODUCTION

Janet Emig (1997) in "Writing as a Mode of Learning" illustrated how and why writing was essential to learning. (www.dartmouth.edu). According to Janet Emig, writing is unique to learning because it originates a verbal construct that is graphically recorded (Janet Emig, May, 1977), (p.122-128). Writing has always been viewed as a very significant skill in English study, since it involves a process of selecting, combining and arranging individual words to develop ideas (Sun, Fushan, (2014) p.1476-1482). It's a cognitive process in which students have to understand what to write and how to write. When writing, students must both originate and record their thinking. (www.dartmouth.edu). They must attend simultaneously to process and product. Writing, on the other hand, must be structured, meticulous and concise. (www.dartmouth.edu). It must provide a context for an audience that is not part of the environment but that exists apart from the writer. In sum, writing forces students to become more careful, more engaged participants in the learning process. (www.dartmouth.edu). By writing, we don't simply mean that all the commas are in the right place and that no modifiers are misplaced or dangling. Rather, we mean that a student has written clearly and eloquently. (www.dartmouth.edu). While we can parse the writing process in various ways, each with its own limitations, we believe that it's useful to see writing as a three-step recursive process of invention, composition, and revision. In order to achieve clarity and eloquence, a student must have a sound and coherent structure, focused and cohesive paragraphs, a solid sense of the sentence, and good grammar. (www.dartmouth.edu). So how to improve the students' writing skill has been a tough task for both the teachers and the students for a long time.

When being a visiting scholar in University of Denver from February, 2014 to March, 2015, I audited some writing classes and found that almost all the teachers prefer to use writing workshop in their writing class. With the time going by, I became more and more interested in their way of teaching writing, so I began to think more about it and did some qualitative researches about it, mainly on the concept and the function of writing workshop, on the techniques used in the writing workshop and on the effect of the application of writing workshop in the writing class. By interviewing some of the DU students and professors, observing classes and examining course materials from syllabi to lecture notes, I undertook an exploration of the essentials of effective teaching of writing. The following are some of the findings.

II. THE DEFINITION OF WRITING WORKSHOP

According to the dictionary, workshop means a group of people engaged in study or work on a creative project or subject, such as a writing workshop. (dictionary.reference.com). Writing workshop, also known as writer's workshop, is a method of teaching writing using a workshop method. Writing workshop advocates see the teacher as a facilitator of the student's expression; though he or she may intervene, strategically, in the technique of students' writing processes and texts, he or she is not to critique what the student writes. The writing workshop allows teachers to meet the needs of their students by differentiating their instruction and gearing instruction based on information gathered through the workshop. (groups.diigo.com). Students are given opportunities to write in a variety of genres and helps foster a love of writing. (groups.diigo.com). Students have a large amount of choice in their topic and style of writing. The teacher acts as a mentor author, modeling writing techniques and conferring with students as they move through the writing process. Direct writing instruction takes place in the form of a mini-lesson at the beginning of each workshop and is followed by active writing time. (www.holycrossdeerfield.org). The workshop usually ends with a sharing of student work.

Here are some answers from the survey conducted among the students taking the writing course. Most of them are English majors and juniors. One student says like this: writing workshop is working on a writing project over a period

of time, getting other people's input on your written work for improvement. A writing workshop is good for improving writing ability. Another student says: A writing workshop is an opportunity to express yourself through writing and to have the writing read by your peers and hear their opinions about it. It gives me a new perspective on my writing and allows me to grow. Most of the students think it is a good way to receive feedback and tips on the written work from their peers to better improve it. So the writing workshop focuses on two things: creativity and cooperation. The students have to create a piece of writing for the other students to read and discuss in class and the other students have to speak out their opinions about the written piece. Then the whole class helps to work out something new. So it needs participation and cooperation from all the students. The students must be attentive, active and creative in class. So the best interpretation for a writing workshop is that it is a place for cultivating creativity by doing a series of reading, writing, discussion, comments, suggestion and revision. It is a good way for students to improve their writing ability and to find their writing talent.

III. THE FUNCTION OF A WRITING WORKSHOP

Theoretically speaking, writing is a process for thinking that needs more practice. Instead of spending the majority of class time on spelling tests, grammar worksheets, handwriting practice, and other isolated sub-skills of writing, writing workshop is designed to emphasize the act of writing itself—students spend most of their time putting pencil to paper, not just learning about it. Over time, students learn to choose their own topics and to manage their own development as they work through a wide variety of writing projects in a sustained and self-directed way. (www.hanoi.qsischool.org). In professional writing workshops, emphasis is placed on sharing work with the class, on peer conferencing and editing, and on the collection of a wide variety of work in a writing folder, and eventually in a portfolio. Teachers write with their students and share their own work as well. The workshop setting encourages students to think of themselves as writers, and to take their writing seriously. (www.hanoi.qsischool.org). As the saying goes, Practice makes perfect. In real life, we have to put what we see and what we experience into words, learn how to apply theory into practice, to express ourselves, to interact with the teachers and classmates, to make new friends, to learn from peers and to do something new, to find ourselves, such as our interest and talent, to improve ourselves and to become a potential writer, etc. And a writing workshop can serve all these purposes. It stresses the very important factors in the writing class, such as how crucial it is to make students feel special and feel like real writers. (search.barnesandnoble.com). It helps to enhance student's writing and inspire them to write with skill and confidence. In class, students jot down ideas, observations, and thoughts which allow them to see many possibilities for future writing projects. It inspires students by offering larger audiences for their work, showing students their own writing and creating a light environment where students can gather and share each other's ideas and creations. (search.barnesandnoble.com). It can build the students' confidence and self-esteem and let them see what fun and how creative writing can be.

IV. HOW TO APPLY WORKSHOP IN A WRITING CLASS

The writing workshop is the heart of a successful writing class. Essential elements of the writing workshop include the nature and extent of teacher's control of assignments, the variety of class activities and students' interactions. Factors to be considered in adapting the workshop format to different teaching situations include selection of teaching models, course coverage, selection of language styles and organization, attention given to teaching and writing processes, use of teacher-student writing conferences, techniques such as writing buddies and peer editing, selection of writing assignments and evaluation methods and criteria (Retherford, Robert, 1998/03). In these workshops, teachers use student papers (in part or in whole) as the necessary material of discussion and instruction. (www.dartmouth.edu). When teaching a writing workshop, it is very important for the teacher to establish a format in which peer conferencing and peer feedback are used. To ensure that the students are able to comment productively and effectively on their peers' papers, the teacher decides on the critiquing method he wants to use and practices it. Good critiques are more than "I liked it" or "I didn't like it". They offer analysis and present examples of what the critique did or didn't like. By modeling the form of critique the teachers want the participants to use, students will get much more feedback on their work. The teacher usually sets a rule, informing participants that insults will not be tolerated, no personal attack but constructive suggestions. In class the teacher first devises a schedule of when participants will share their work, then the teacher assigns the students to write something, such as a personal experience, a memory story, a poem, a short story, a passage, etc. and each participant can submit his work through email or through discussion boards for workshop participants to share their projects. This allows the teacher the chance to review and select submissions that illustrate the topic he wants to cover in the face-to-face session. And the participant can also bring enough copies of his work to the class for the rest of the class to review beforehand. After receiving the copy of the participant's work, the whole class read the piece carefully, make comments on the paper, and write down the questions they have for the author. In the next class, the teacher has the author of the piece read aloud a section of his choosing, leads off the discussion by teaching the participants how to think critically for themselves about their writing, giving them enough time to write notes or chat with fellow participants before sharing their critiques with the entire workshop, asking each person to say what he liked about the piece and what he thought needed improvement. The teacher encourages the students to engage in workshop discussion by maintaining eye contact with the participants and shifting expectant gaze around the room.

After the group discussion and the whole class discussion, the teacher will tell the author what he liked and what he thought needed improvement and gives his constructive suggestions. Then the teacher and the students return the marked-up manuscript to the author so he will be able to review the notes the teacher and the rest of the class have made. The students take their written work back to revise it and then come back to class and once again begin the process, reading the written work, group discussions, peer reviewing, making suggestions and comments and extracting new ideas ,etc. At the end of the term, some students will have finished a long story or somewhat a novel. So this is a process to develop something from a paragraph into a long story to a novel. It's a step-by-step creation process! It integrates reading with writing. It integrates theory with active writing practice. It involves the students' imagination, participation, discussion and interaction. The students benefit much from the writing workshop. During this process, the students come to know themselves by their discoveries of new ideas and the depth of their own potential and thus develop their critical thinking and creativity. It promotes the mutual understanding between the teacher and the students and they develop a true friendship and get the inspiration that is very valuable and precious .The students learned many new things, such as new writing techniques, new ideas and most important of all, they learned how to appreciate other people's hard work, how to do critical thinking and how to get along well with their classmates. So some students say that a writing workshop is like a community, in which they can communicate ideas, opinions, likes or dislikes freely and they can get helpful feedback and new perspectives from others. It helps them to broaden the horizon and further improve their writing. By creating a piece of writing, the students gain more respect and recognition from their peers and the professor, which encourage them to build more confidence in themselves. According to the survey, most of the students prefer the writing workshop, saying it is very helpful and effective in helping them to get the feedback from their peers honestly and quickly and the writing workshop gave them plentiful opportunities to revise and improve their work before it receives a grade.

V. SOME STRATEGIES THE INSTRUCTORS USE IN THE WRITING WORKSHOP

How to conduct a writing workshop successfully is mainly decided by the teacher. The teacher asks the students to post their papers on the Canvas discussion board before class so that the teacher can review the essays before class and choose those that best illustrate the writing issues that will be discussed in class. Conducting an engaging and constructive workshop draws on skills as a discussion leader, for talking about student writing differs in some important ways from talking about the other readings in your class. (www.dartmouth.edu). First, the writer is in the room. Writing workshops must therefore be sensitively conducted. Second, the aim of the writing workshop is to enhance students' authority and responsibility as readers and writers. The instructor must therefore facilitate rather than direct the discussion. Third, the writing workshop emphasizes the complex role of the reader in a writer's process. Instructors will encourage readers to "out" their questions and concerns about a paper so that writers understand the myriad of responses their work has evoked. They will internalize this sense of audience and draw on it as they revise. (www.dartmouth.edu). The following are some strategies the instructors at University of Denver adopted in the writing workshop.

A. *Using Facilitative Responses in Modeling the Students to Diagnose and Respond to Their Classmates' Work*

The idea behind the facilitative response is that students learn to write best when they are made responsible for their own writing and re-writing decisions. (www.dartmouth.edu). The facilitative response permits students to retain this important responsibility by locating authority and authorship with them. Facilitative remarks are most often phrased as questions, carefully crafted so that they encourage students to consider ideas and their expression more fully. (www.dartmouth.edu). The teachers do not give their students easy answers, nor do they provide them with explicit directions for revision. Rather, they raise questions that encourage students to sift through the instructor's remarks in order to develop revision strategies on their own, and to retain responsibility for their own writing processes. (www.dartmouth.edu). The teacher usually addresses a weakness in very particular terms such as the question "Where is your thesis sentence?" instead of the general ones, such as "I like it" or "I don't like it". In class the teacher usually says like this: Any questions? Comments? Suggestions? By asking questions instead of a list of directions, the students will have to determine how to answer the questions in a best way. They will discover that there are several ways to express an idea or develop an argument, and that they must choose the one that best meets their aims. In this way, authority remains with the author. (www.dartmouth.edu).

B. *Integrating Reading with Writing in Writing Class*

According to Carl B. Smith & Karin L. Dahl, (1984), the correlation between reading and writing is like this—Those who read well usually write well; those who write well generally read well.(Carl B. Smith & Karin L. Dahl, 1984), (p.1.). As we know, reading can inspire students by introducing them to great ideas and improving their ability to think critically and analytically. Moreover, reading centers class discussion, giving students something to talk about beyond their own personal experiences. Reading also gives students something to write about, for students often lack the experience to come up with sophisticated subjects for their essays, but the texts provide these. Finally, reading illustrates models of truly excellent writing, thereby offering students instruction in voice, organization, syntax, and language. (www.dartmouth.edu).

But reading and writing aren't disparate course activities. In fact, reading and writing work best when one process fuels or informs the other. (www.dartmouth.edu). Students can learn to write many categories of writing and come into contact with different kinds of information through reading many kinds of materials. In order to make sure that reading and writing are working together effectively in class, the teacher usually does like this: The teacher assigns students models of good writing, such as an article, a poem, a short story, a novel, etc. to read before class and then in class the teacher breaks the students into smaller groups for group discussion, and then the students reconvene to compare observations, exchange their ideas, opinions and the teacher takes time in class to talk with students about how an argument is constructed ; the writing style; what, exactly, makes the writing so good, etc. Then from the discussion, the teacher generates materials with students— that articulate the qualities of good writing in their particular discipline; and finally the teacher asks the students to evaluate a piece of writing according to these standards in the form of oral presentation or written report.

C. *Using Student-driven Process*

After the student reads his paper aloud, the teacher facilitates the students by asking questions and requiring the students to offer their perspectives and insists that students be respectfully and critically engaged with the paper, trying to avoid comments that are too harsh or too soft. The students will turn to the classmate next to them and chat about the paper, and then reconvene the group for group discussion, jot down their comments, ideas, suggestions and responses. Students are more open to criticism of their papers once they've received positive feedback. They also need to know what they're doing right before they tackle what they're doing wrong. (www.dartmouth.edu). The teacher usually encourages students to give their different opinions for the students to sort from and make choices as they revise. And finally the teacher will offer praise before moving on to the critique, give students suggestions for how to improve their papers, offer students a "pay-off" for submitting to the class critique. Students will soon see that having their papers workshoped is a valuable experience. (www.dartmouth.edu).

VI. CASE STUDY: GROUP CONFERENCES USED IN UNIVERSITY OF DENVER'S CREATIVE WRITING CLASS

Lucy Calkins (1994) in "The Art of Teaching Writing" has described conferring as "the heart of our teaching" in the writing workshop. (Lucy McComack Calkins, 1994), (p.189). Conferences provide instructors and students an opportunity to develop the kinds of relationships that promote good writing. (www.dartmouth.edu). Some professors in University of Denver have discovered the benefits of holding conferences in small groups. They require students to post their work on Blackboard and to respond to their peers' papers there. They assign students early in the quarter into small editing groups, modeling them on how to diagnose and respond to one another's writing correctly. The teacher asks all the members of the group to read one another's papers and to come to the conference with comments and questions. (www.dartmouth.edu). During the conference, the teacher first listened carefully when the peer commentators talked about their reaction to the paper, such as things they liked and things that they found problematic ,then the teacher asked questions that clarify the peers' perspectives, offered his own perspectives and then gave the writer a chance to respond. In group conferences, students engage in debates about writing. It helps students to better understand the conventions of academic discourse. (www.dartmouth.edu). When talking about their papers with their peers, students will learn where their readers stumble. They can also find out why. Often, these conversations lead to a better understanding of the writing conventions that the student has neglected or misunderstood. (www.dartmouth.edu). Reading three or four papers rather than one encourages students to determine more generally what works and what doesn't. They'll take with them a better sense of the principles (rather than simply the particulars) of good writing and they usually can give thoughtful, constructive advice to their peers. (www.dartmouth.edu). Group conferences help students to understand writing as a process, and to increase their sense of mastery of what is often a complex and difficult task. (www.dartmouth.edu). The use of group conference in class helps the students to clarify ideas varied from session to session and the students benefit more from careful thinking and peer evaluation. The students also realize that the best way to learn something is to teach it. When instructing their peers, students learn how to improve their own prose. (www.dartmouth.edu).

VII. THE EFFECT OF THE APPLICATION OF WRITING WORKSHOP IN ENGLISH WRITING CLASS

Writing workshop can be a wonderful way for students to share and receive feedback about their writing. The workshop atmosphere is more conducive to personal expression and growth than the traditional writing classroom. It provides a supportive yet challenging, energizing environment for the students. According to the survey and the interview, most of the students enjoyed the writing workshop. They say that they learned a lot from the writing class, such as the critical thinking, the cooperation and the participation and most important of all, the virtue of sharing. They learn to share their works and ideas with others. Too often students write only to please their instructors, whose expectations they rarely understand. (www.dartmouth.edu). Knowing that their peers will read their papers gives students a concrete sense of to whom they are writing, and why. (www.dartmouth.edu). One student says: I learned that what makes sense to me doesn't always make sense to the reader. Peer reviews help students to understand that they aren't writing for themselves, but for readers and understand writing as a public, communal act, rather than as a

private, isolated one. So students learned to develop a sense of audience. That expresses the essence of writing: keep the readers in mind, see things from the readers' perspective. Actually the writing workshop does provide the students with the opportunity to get to know each other and start to really learn from each other by getting others' perspectives, ideas, and feedback quickly, which helps the author to grow more quickly. This is called peer grading or peer reviewing. It is as important or even more helpful than the professor's grading and advice, as the students usually pay much more attention to the peers' opinions or comments. Students are influenced much more by their peers than they are by the teachers. (www.ttms.org). When a student reads something to the class and gets a particular reaction, they really take it to heart. (www.ttms.org) From psychological perspective, the peers' praise and recognition can exercise a greater effect on their self-esteem, as the saying goes, keep up with the Joneses. Even in the cutthroat climate of today's competitive colleges, students thrive best in cooperative classrooms. (adjunctnation.com). The writing workshop creates a natural and critical learning environments, providing the students with a good chance to communicate and cooperate with their peers. It helps them to grow more mature and become more open-minded. Everyone in the class learns to become a top-notch critic, providing insightful feedback on the peer's work. In class they need to read a text (here we use "text" broadly to include everything from books, to works of art, to results of scientific experiments, to cultural, social, and economic systems (www.dartmouth.edu) actively, looking for patterns, scribble up the margins of their books with questions and quibbles, raising questions or challenging the writer as they read, do a little research to enhance their understanding, learn to read as a writer and to think critically. In peer review sessions, students have to field questions about their writing. (www.dartmouth.edu). They have to explain and sometimes defend their writing strategies. It helps students to understand writing as a process, and to increase their sense of mastery of what is often a complex and difficult task. (www.dartmouth.edu). The face to face communication in a comfortable surrounding can inspire the students' creativity, arouse students' interest in writing, help them to know their peers better and to discover themselves and make them feel more confident. It teaches them how to respond productively to other students' writing. As for the teachers, by reading the students' written works and observing the students' performance in class, such as the group discussion, the comments and the suggestions they make, etc., the teacher can know more about the students, such as their characteristics, their hobbies, their likes and dislikes, etc. and can become more interested in them and the teacher and the students can develop a lasting friendship between them. As the teacher and the students get more comfortable with workshop, when the teacher asks for volunteers, the students will be eager to volunteer—they have seen how helpful the process is and will want the "leg up" that an in-class critique can offer. (www.dartmouth.edu).

VIII. CONCLUSION

From the analysis made above, it is clear that students can make greater improvements in their English writing ability and a safe conclusion can be drawn, that is, a writing workshop is helpful and beneficial to the teachers and the students, both academically and socially. As the saying goes, practice makes perfect. Three brains are better than one. In class the teacher usually says like this: You can be strange or different, thus encouraging the students to learn to think critically and creatively, to find themselves and their potentials, to contribute more new ideas to the class. By fully making use of their imagination and creativity to create something new in the writing workshop, the students gradually develop a keen interest in writing, cultivate a good habit of writing, and develop a deep love for writing. By contributing new ideas and comments and suggestions to the class, the students learn to think critically, to cooperate with others, to listen to others, to share their work with others, to respect others' hard work and to learn from each other. On the whole, the writing workshop benefits the students much in their growing to become a potential writer in the future.

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