Constructivist Learning Conversations in Writing Centers: Feedback and Reflection as Integrated Tools

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Abstract

Learning how to write, from the constructivist perspective [1], is seen as a mental process; therefore, is best achieved when students face complex, real-world issues in which the steps are graded and the answers are unknown. The fact is that the writing process can only be well-guided by the teachers whose roles can be a facilitator, a guide, and a reflective practitioner [2]. Writing centers, employing different learning needs, are coming of age because of their attractive learning environment and timings, for students to share their concerns one-on-one, to explore meaningful conversations, and to freely engage in a guided process. The environment for experiential learning [3] how to think and to write is based on a one-on-one or group work instruction after becoming apparent that writing could not be taught to a classroom of a large number of students effectively. An essential part of the student learning process at writing centers comes from engaging with feedback and reflecting on students' written papers as integrated tools used synchronously leading to student engagement in reflection and engagement with the feedback methodology. This study mainly deals with the mentioned feedback students get orally at centers, and the accompanying tools–reflection and the reflective practices experienced by students during their writing journey. While explaining the journey, the focus primarily will be on qualitative study outcomes, self-initiated practices reported, reviews of field studies and drawing connections on the previous studies and analysis. Reflection on the main research question, the following points will guide the formation of the theoretical framework for this study: a) what sort of methodology the centers can employ and what type of methodological tools can be used for the students coming from mixed abilities with different needs b) which theoretical foundations for a principled approach/method to teaching writing can be employed by the centers c) what teaching techniques and activities work best under the selected approach/es d) can we use oral feedback and reflection as integrated tools in the center as a methodology e) how can we make students and consultants reflective in this guided process?

Keywords: Writing centers/Labs, constructivism, feedback, reflective practice, andragogy, experiential learning

1. Introduction

The centers, although it is impossible to make generalizations and specifications for all, can be considered as academic facilities where students see the "knowers" as knowledge-feedback providers and where they can meet with the provider face-to face or online (one-on-one or in groups) to improve their writing skills. Both consultants and students, in order to promote dialogue and negotiation, methodologically, accept mutual agreement in a non-threatening environment where receiving/sending knowledge with questioning techniques in that learning process is the ultimate goal.

This study addresses a few educational issues-a comprehensive methodology in writing and its accompanying teaching tools-by proposing a means of using oral feedback and reflection as teaching and learning tools for furthering and supporting student reflection in writing skill at centers. The broadest question of this paper is to discuss what sort of methodology the centers can employ, and what type of methodological tools can be used for the students coming from mixed abilities with different writing needs. That the types of strategies provided make the learners and the consultants reflective?Pursuing the above questions involves the following four research domains: academic writing, constructivist theory of learning based on Kolb's experiential learning model and Knowle's Andragogy of learning, Schon' s reflective teaching and reflection and oral feedback. To be able to answer the research questions above, we should first set the theoretical principles of the stated domains, and explain the epistemological and methodological framework within the principle/s of constructivist theory.

1.1 Constructivist Learning

After 1930's and 1940's, under a pompous effect of Behaviorist theory in writing and education, witnessing the harmful effects of the Pavlov-like-minded educators in the field, most of the students

witnessed the negative emotional climate of writing process. Shifting this paradigm from Behaviorism to Constructivism, the focus has become more on how information processes in the minds of the learners, in which steps have been taken in the learner's mind while learning, and the changes in perceiving writing as social and meaningful act. "Alternative approaches and methods" of the 1970s and 1980s [4], provided evidences of somewhat the varied history.

Writing as a productive skill has shifted its paradigm from product oriented to process oriented view, which is consistent with the shift from traditional teaching to alternative approaches [4], focusing on the learners and their involvement in writing skill courses [5]. The succession of a writing event in the course of time give learners the possibility of revising/revisiting their thinking. So, the learners through anticipating the writing event elaborates their experience, actively encounters the experience, and then assesses whether the outcome has been validated and the process has been fulfilled. Kelly proposed steps of change and the discussed belief system of the learners though the corollaries and his main postulate [1]. This view, as justified by [6], explains the concept of "assimilation of knowledge into person's action schema" by connecting action with the happening based on his fundamental fact of knowledge

Regarding the relationship between theory of Kelly's Constructivism and writing skill, this study adopts Kelly's famous claim seeing person-as-the-scientists [7] and their development from the view of Piaget's theory proposing "to understand is to discover, or reconstruct by rediscovery…" (as cited in [8]). Under the light of constructivism and Kolb's experiential learning cycle, this study addresses how oral feedback and reflection can be used as integrated tools in the consultation process of writing centers. Learners in that specific context will be discussed under the five assumptions of Knowles's "Androgogy" [9], describing adult learning as "the art and science of helping adults learn", to some extend with his practical description of androgogy. He sets the assumptions about how adults learn, as: Self-Concept, Adult Learner Experience, Readiness to Learn, Orientation to Learning, and Motivation to Learn [9].

1.2 Feedback and Reflection

Writing skill competency includes "reflection as a core element in addition to knowledge, skills and attitudes, values and communication" [10]. Feedback is generally "associated with interaction between two persons" whereas reflection is considered as a "process in which the individual teacher or student, soon after an episode, thinks loud about (or rather meditates upon) what exactly happened, why did it happen that way, and what could have been done better". [11] considers "feedback as 'information provided by an agent…regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding,' highlighting that feedback legitimately comes from non-teacher sources". They also state that "When examining research about feedback, opinion varies about *who* should provide feedback, *how and when* it is best delivered, *what* the content of feedback should be, and *why* it should be provided". Feedback, unlike in the traditional classrooms, comes with its non-judgmental nature, and is evaluative, guided, timely, and focused. [12] depict "Feedback is an instructional practice indicated as enhancing both students' skills and motivation…. an agent regarding some aspect(s) of the learner's task performance, intended to modify the learner's cognition, motivation and/or behavior".

Reflection "is the ability to reflect on and analyze material in order to form reasoned judgements" is seen as "central to critical thinking and deeper learning"[13]. [14] consider reflection as a mental process incorporating critical thought about an experience whereas [15] takes it as reflective learning process. Donald Schon is regarded as having a major contribution to the understanding of professional practice and reflective thinking[16]. Dewey is considered notably; as he mentioned, ideas are simply imposed on students remain 'static' and 'hamper' or 'swamp' thinking (Dewey cited in [16]).

Schon proposes practical knowledge that all professionals hold about their profession, and suggests that practical knowledge is developed within action, "just as it is articulated within action. The concept "reflection-in-action" is invoked to refer to the active and non-propositional processes by which new knowing-inaction is developed-a matter"[17]. So, one can experience reflection-in-action while reflecting-on-action. Schon, combining the feedback and reflection, states that "Actions proceed, with relative success, because we are attentive to feedback; and, generally, the feedback is unsurprising".

"Feedback on written work can be used as a vehicle for reflection" [13]. Both feedback and reflection require practice, action; feedback can provide students with a concept of experiential learning in the learning environment, and that will lead to effective reflection "providing an opportunity for feeding forward and for self-development for university students, and placing reflection on feedback at the heart" Mutch in [13]. The belief system of the teachers certainly affects the way of judgements and the role of them in the process [18]; and "such beliefs are partly the result of personal constructs but also originate in the social context in which teachers work" [19].

Well-monitored and thoroughly managed feedback- if accurate, timely, comprehensive, constructive, supervisory, and appropriate- has great potential to feed the learning process further, encouraging, and also motivating for the future tasks. Reflection enables students to reexamine their task-based learning experiences, and motivates to finalize documents based on given feedback, which facilitates and further enhances through the implementation of the reflective practices.

1.3 Writing Centers/Labs

The centers, as an enabling academic facilities, guide students based on their individual writing needs and interests across the curriculum. The goal is to equip students from all disciplines and levels with the necessary skills required in their personal and professional academic lives, employing a teaching methodology, which is purely constructivist, student-centered, and accepting inquiry based learning in which questioning-based interaction techniques are employed.

"With the supportive, collaborative pedagogical strategies of one-on-one conference in which the student sets the agenda for learning" [20], the labs provide a broad range of services, including on-site and on-line consultations and various outreach programs. To that end, although a great deal has been discussed about them, there are still debatable methodological issues utilized by the centers, which fosters the need of improvement through critical analysis of the methodologies used.

1.4 Consultation Process and the Procedures

Consultation process at writing centers are expected to start with a clear understanding and the expectations of the assignment/s; clarifications are made orally, the scope of the work, aim of the session are discussed, and only then ultimate goal is set for the session. The feedback and reflection strategies are used in combination orally and professionally. In order to establish an effective feedback-reflection process, feedback whether written or oral should be designed, providing opportunities for feeding forward and self-development of students [13]. "When feedback is given with the aim to enhance writing performance, the assumption is that it evokes reflection on the content and the process of writing. Mindful reception of the feedback promotes learning or performance" [21], [12].

1.5 The role of the consultant

This may be the most unique side of the centers where all parties are collaborating, work as equals, where the consultants facilitate learners in the process respectfully. Consultants facilitate learning through the Socratic method (posing open-ended questions or leading questions pertaining to student writing). The non-directive strategies provide student a kind of guidance, minimize the superior role of the consultant, create a respect for the consultant's ownership. Building a confidence with the learner, the sequence of the conversation process always begins with encouraging the students to clarify their needs and questions during the session. Consultants literally act as organizers of resources and resource themselves.

1.6 Learning environment

Unlike the traditional classroom settings and environment, writing centers deal with the process of writing rather than merely focusing on the end-product. Due to the welcoming nature of the environment and formal assessment of the end-product, the learning process minimizes the risks, fears, shyness, etc… but more motivates and encourages students to keep forward in a mutual discussion and in a relaxing environment with non –directive strategies, which allow learners more space for finding alternative ways, solutions, revisiting the previous alternatives and ensuring the best higher order thinking skills in a Socratic way of questioning manner.

1.7 Teaching and Learning strategies and tools

The writing centers provide a setting where both parties join in the learning process together, where the consultants share their experiences and knowledge, and the learner receives feedback other from the consultant, other than the classroom teacher or friends. The open channel of communication is provided as to see the natural ongoing learning process engaging the learner in the process by reducing the learning anxiety, breaking the barrier of learning such as weaknesses, unclear points, etc… where both parties experience a unique relationship together.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study approaches to writing issues from methodological perspective, which aims to contribute knowledge and understanding by describing the methodological tools and strategies used

at writing labs. As such, the purpose of this qualitative research is not to provide generalizable findings. Instead, this research has a discovery focus and uses an iterative approach.

Although many Writing centers are not experiencing diverse student population, there is an increase in diversity affects- the way that the centers function comprehensively at all levels, from Capstone projects, seminars, workshops to one-on-one and/or group consultation sessions with the registered students who schedule appointments for their writing concerns. This paper closely takes a look at the teaching tools and strategies used by the consultants at the centers-where all students are expected to take semester based academic courses and deliver papers. Reflection on the above issue, the following research questions guided the formation of the theoretical framework for this study:

2.1 Which theoretical foundations for a principled approach/method to teaching writing can be employed by the centers?

The review of literature and the qualitative study outcomes([22], [23], [20], [24], [25], [26], [27] prove that the process of learning at centers require consultation related concepts and theories. "More recently, the writing process has been framed within a social constructivist philosophy". So, ultimately we refer to Constructivist Learning principles and Communicative Task based teaching efforts. The environment for experiential learning [3], the constructivist learning principles are applied in sessions, which is guided mainly by four principles–holistically learners construct their own meaning making process through active experimentation; new learning builds on prior knowledge; learning is enhanced by interaction; and learning develops through authentic tasks [7].

2.2 What teaching techniques and activities work best under the selected approach/es?

Teaching techniques and activity types at centers varied, such as dialogue, responding to command, group work problem solving/task completion, information clarification activities, improvisations, question and answer, or simple corrections through guided and facilitated conversations. [28] describe the learner's role within CLT in the following terms: "The role of learner as negotiator – between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning – emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes" and "The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way". According to [29], the more basic the idea the student has learned, the greater the ability to apply it to new problems.

2.3 Can we use oral feedback and reflection as integrated tools in the center as a methodology?

These strong tools confirm that integrated use of both of them can reinforce students' behaviors, activate their use of knowledge process, correct their behaviors, and promote improvement in their performances that could lead to change. When properly received, feedback can help lab students "develop metacognitive perspectives needed to improve their performance and monitor their own continuing progress" [20]. [12] addressed the effects of feedback providing improvement strategies and of a reflection assignment on students' writing performance, writing motivation, and writing process; the study showed that "significant interaction effect of feedback condition and reflection condition was found for performance". Feedback was used in various educational settings and was regarded inevitable to improve knowledge and skill acquisition [30].

Reflective practice, on the other hand, is not a continuous process; while reflecting in learning as a response to question related to task or unexpected moments, the response of a student triggers questions about tacit practices and their underlying assumptions,[31]. Reflective thinking [2] are the valuable strategies not only for the students who get the support to develop ability and skills but also for the instructors who could use to refine and improve the teaching, which may lead to growth in professional practice.

Conclusion

The qualitative studies comprehensively provided a conceptual analysis of "feedback and reflections" of the instructors as evidence related to their impacts on learning and achievement in classroom settings and the writing center. "Feedback and reflection are a particularly important focus […] because the effective and regular reflection on feedback remains a fundamental mechanism for … university students feel supported, accustomed to and comfortable within the university environment" [32]. Constructivist approach and the suggested tools at personal development level provide learners

with the opportunity to construct their own knowledge in a supportive environment and, thereby, empowers them to be autonomous learners. To achieve this, the learning cycle should provide a means for learners to interpret and reflect on their own learning and construct alternative meanings to expand their perspectives.

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