

## WRITERS' GROUPS FOR MA ESOL STUDENTS: COLLABORATIVELY CONSTRUCTING A MODEL OF THE WRITING PROCESS

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### Introduction

This paper considers one particular Writer Development<sup>1</sup> (WD) group of MA students from a small UK university. While asserting that writers' groups can, in general, be beneficial to master's-degree-level TESOL students, the specific focus of the paper is on one activity that was undertaken by the WD group: The collaborative construction of a model of the writing process. I will first give a brief background of writers' groups before going on to explain the need for a new model of the writing process. After describing the model that was constructed by the WD group, I will briefly present some data that shows how the writers used the model and perceived it as beneficial. Finally, I will suggest some possible avenues for further research on, and uses for, the model.

### Supporting academic writers via writers' groups

Although writing classes are becoming more ubiquitous in undergraduate programmes, at the postgraduate level, specified writing classes are rarely found (Mullen 2001; Aitchison 2003). This is the case at our institution as well: postgraduate students are required to write academic research papers, and though they are warmly and sincerely invited to consult with their teachers or supervisors whenever they need to, they have no explicit writing instruction, and are left to do their writing more or less on their own.

It seems reasonable to assume that by the time writers have worked their way through years of formal education to the postgraduate level, especially students aspiring to become ESOL teachers

themselves, they have already developed into fairly sophisticated writers who know how to 'do' academic writing (Morss & Murray 2001: 36). It may also seem reasonable to assume that, as writing continues to be seen as essentially a solitary activity (Aitchison 2003), academic writers at this advanced level can just get on with it (Mullen 2001; Lee and Boud 2003).

Both these assumptions are on shaky ground, however. Mullen (2001) discusses the problematic lack of writing skill development in postgraduate writers (particularly master's degree candidates), and calls for the absolute necessity of writing instruction at the postgraduate level. Morss & Murray (2001) demonstrate that, even for seasoned professional academic writers, structured writing support facilitates writer development and writing output in a way that solitude cannot.

It seems, then, that postgraduate writers might not best be served by being left alone to get on with their writing projects. This may be particularly true for international students, who are likely to be writing in a second or third language—which is, in turn, likely to have different conventions for academic writing than their first language (Aitchison 2003).

Traditional writing classes, however, might not be necessary. Elbow (1989) proposes a 'teacherless writing class' in which writers regularly meet to bolster each other in the writing process. Called 'writers' groups' or 'peer support groups' by other authors (e.g. Reeves 2002; Gere 1987; Luth et. al 2001), these groups of writers gathering together to offer mutual support and feedback on writing have been found to be beneficial for the development of writers and their writing (Reeves 2002).

Writers' groups are being used increasingly in the UK and Australia to support academics (Murray & MacKay 1998; Morss & Murray 2001; Lee & Boud 2003; Badley 2006; Murray & Newton 2008; Washburn 2008;), as well as PhD students

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<sup>1</sup> Although "writing development" is the term more often used for this area of academic activity (ex. Murray 2001), I prefer the term "writer development" (ex. Badley, 2008), which puts emphasis on the person, rather than on the process or product.

(Murray 2001; Aitchison 2003; Aitchison & Lee; 2006; Grant 2006; Chihota 2008; Badley 2008).

If writers' groups have had such success for other academic writers, it stands to reason that they may benefit master's-level writers as well. It might, in fact, be argued, that MA students—who no longer have the luxury of undergraduate writing classes, and who do not yet have the benefit of experience in research writing—have more of a need for this kind of support.

It was with this information as a grounding that I set up and facilitated a Writers Development (WD) group for six master's-level TESOL teachers-in-training. The WD group met weekly for two academic terms (a total of 24 meetings), which were audio-recorded, yielding over 50 hours of recorded data. Other data sources include my own journal, the academic writing of the group members, reflective journals of the group members, freewriting from the workshop sessions, a questionnaire, and follow-up interviews.

The writers in the WD group were six MA TESOL or MA TESOL & Translation students. All were international students, using English as an additional language. This was their first experience conducting, and writing about, their own research. The research writing undertaken was four 4000-word action research projects, two projects for each term. In addition to the six student-teacher writers, I acted as facilitator, as well as an additional member of the group. It was my intention to intervene or guide the group interaction as little as possible, as I was interested in seeing what the student-writers themselves would make of the group.

### **Developing metacognitive awareness Of the writing process**

One important aspect of these writers' groups is, akin to the goals of writing centres, to develop writers' metacognitive awareness of their own writing processes (Thompson 1999). It is believed that understanding one's own writing process will help a writer take control of that process (O'Neil 2006), rather than be controlled, or immobilised, by it (Elbow 1998). Establishing a meta-language for talking to other writers about writing and the writing process is an important first step

in developing this metacognitive awareness. Meta-language development is a phenomenon that has been found to occur naturally in the context writers' groups (Aitchison 2003), and I had hoped to observe the group building their own meta-language, and seeing if/how it led to their meta-awareness of the writing process.

However, by the end of the first term, in listening to the recordings I found that, other than when I prompted discussion, there was very little talk among members about writing. The only discussions that featured anything about the writing process itself centred around finding a suitable topic. Most other discussions focused on deadlines, and how much tutors were or were not being helpful. As such, the group was not developing its own meta-language for discussing writing and writing processes.

It is plausible that a meta-language simply could not develop before the student-writers had some substantial writing projects under their belts, and thus some experience upon which to draw. However, because the recorded data did point to some gaps in common understanding, and because there was limited time, at the start of the second term I decided to take a more active role in nurturing this meta-language, rather than waiting for it to develop organically.

I perceived that the most easily-accessible way to start students talking about the writing process would be to present them with a model of that process. The most straight-forward, if somewhat controversial, model of the writing process is the three-stage (pre-writing, writing, re-writing) model that some Writing Centres have found useful in helping their mentors and students develop their writing (O'Neill 2008). When the model was presented, however, the members were dissatisfied with it in much the same way it has been criticized in the literature, saying that the model was much too simple to represent the complicated, messy process they had gone through to produce their first assignments. As one of the members said when she looked at it, "That's way too easy." Like Emig (1977), and Flower & Hayes (1981) before them, the WD group members noted that the process is not so tidy, and certainly does not progress neatly from one stage to

the next. The Flower & Hayes model (1981) (see figure 1) was presented next,

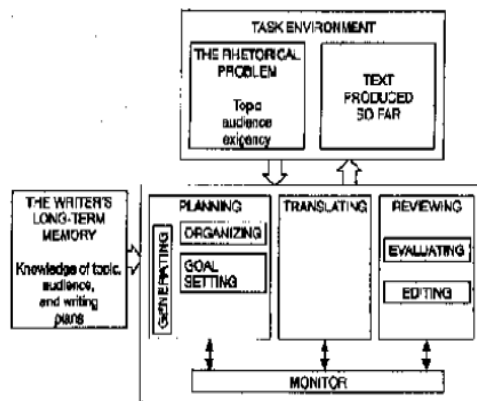


Figure 1 A cognitive process theory of writing (Flower and Hayes, 1981)

but that was unsatisfactory as well, as it did not resonate with the writers. “I don’t even know what this is supposed to mean,” said one WD member. Other models (for example, those found in Furneaux, 1998) were no more successful.

One possible reason the established models were unsatisfactory to the writers is that these older models had been constructed for the understanding of, and use by, people who were only researching the writing process—not necessarily teaching or trying to nurture the writing process. Later on, the models evolved to those made by “experts” for the use of teachers. Furneaux (1998: 257) for example, writes: “White and Arndt’s diagram...offers teachers a framework which tries to capture the recursive, not linear, nature of writing...(emphasis added). Now, writing centres do employ writing process models that are for the use of the student writers themselves, and though they are made by consulting student writers, they are still made by teachers (reference to Pete and Mary).

Perhaps the next necessary step in the evolution of writing process models, then, is a model of the writing process that is representative of how writers describe and understand their own writing processes; a model made by and for the use of writers themselves.

**The need for something new: Constructing a model of the writing process**

The absence of a suitable model led the WD group to collaboratively construct our own model of the writing process. I collected, from all members, descriptions of the process that each person had gone through (from beginnings of ideas to submission of assignments) to produce their first two pieces of research writing. Members described their writing process in any way they saw fit: some drew pictures, other made lists, others wrote in prose.

Although the writers described their processes in different ways, every description of the writing process was made up predominantly of verbs, and time markers (next, and then, or arrows showing time progression). I extracted and categorized all the verbs from each member’s process, and used the time markers to draft an encompassing picture of the writing process, which was taken back to the WD members. The members discussed the model, and suggested changes - several times - until a picture emerged that was generally agreed upon. As a detailed explanation of how this model evolved is beyond the scope of this article, what follows is a description of the final product, thus far.

What emerged from the data and construction sessions, with the WD group members, was that throughout the process, the writers engaged in up to five different Modes of writing. The use of “mode” here is the lay term meaning, “a way or manner in which a thing is done” (Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary). The term was chosen with a view to validating those activities which are not the careful drafting of academic prose, but are still integral parts of the writing process. Thus, reading, taking notes, making outlines, and even putting the writing aside for awhile, can be seen as valid and necessary ways of getting the thing done.

In other words, within the process of completing one piece of writing, the writers switched back and forth among five different ways of moving the writing forward to completion. Within each of these Modes of writing are specific writing actions, or Moves, that a writer can engage in to advance (move forward) the project.

The five different Modes of Writing are: Exploring, Structuring, Polishing & Publishing, Incubating, and Unloading. The

next section will first look at each of these Modes in turn, and at the Moves within the Modes, before presenting the bigger picture of how the modes fit together to make a model of the writing process.

**Exploring**

The first mode is exploring, and it roughly relates to “pre-writing” in the three-stage process. Moves within the Exploring Mode (Figure 2) can be things such as searching for literature, finding a topic, reading, or refining a research focus, etc.



Figure 2: Exploring Mode

**Structuring**

Structuring Mode (figure 3) is where a writer deliberately puts a shape, with an audience in mind, to his/her writing. Structuring moves can be at a global text-level, for example when a writer makes an outline of his/her whole text; or structuring moves can occur at the sentence or paragraph level, where a writer carefully structures (or re-structures) prose so that it is easy for an intended audience to read and understand.

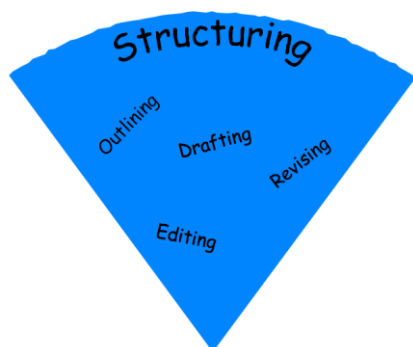


Figure 3: Structuring Mode

**Polishing and Publishing**

Polishing and Publishing (Figure 4) are getting the text aesthetically ready for an intended reader, and then delivering the text

to that reader. Polishing & Publishing moves include making charts and graphs, choosing typefaces, setting margins, correcting typos, printing and binding the text, etc.



Figure 4: Polishing and Publishing Mode

These first three Modes, Exploring, Structuring, and Polishing & Publishing, are quite familiar in most models of the writing process, and when taken in that order, correspond roughly to the 3-stage model. The next two Modes, however, are not found in all models of the writing process.

**Unloading**

The fourth mode of writing is the Unloading Mode (Figure 5). This is where a writer will take the chaos that is in his/her head and attempt to get it out of his/her head—Unload it. Unloading is done without worrying about whether or not the product sounds or looks pretty, and without the writer having to be held accountable for what was said or written. Elbow (1998) calls this the “garbage” stage of writing, a term which elicited strong emotion from the WD group members. Some members loved the term—finding it empowering that “writing crap” was a necessary and valid part of the writing process. Other members hated the term, not liking the idea that their hard work, as imperfect as it was, be labeled as rubbish.



Figure 5: Unloading Mode

Unloading produces “recyclables” (a term suggested by R. Kaser)—the product may seem unusable at first, but can often be composted into something nourishing.

Regardless of preferred terminology, what is important is that this Mode of producing unstructured, messy text is a valid—and perhaps necessary (Elbow 1998)—part of the writing process; it is not a failed attempt at structuring. It may be chaotic, but it is constructive chaos.

The two Unloading Moves are “scribbling” and “babbling”. Scribbling is un-monitored writing—the writer does not worry about structure, or about things making sense; he/she just writes to get things out into the open, knowing that he/she won’t be held accountable for anything that ends up on the paper. Freewriting and listing are possible ways to scribble.

Babbling is unloading by speaking rather than by writing. Again, the writer is not held accountable for anything he/she says (one’s mind can always be changed later on); the writer just recognizes that she/he might need to hear herself say things in order to make sense of them. Babbling can be done alone or, preferably, for some writers, with a sympathetic audience who will listen constructively.

**Incubating**

Incubating is getting away from one’s books, notebooks, or computer, and letting one’s brain work on the writing. There are two incubating moves; one conscious, one subconscious (Figure 6).

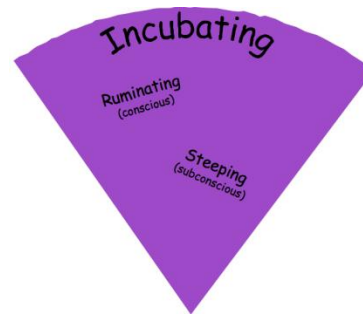


Figure 6: Incubating Mode

‘Ruminating’ is a conscious move, where a writer actively “chews on things” but isn’t necessarily in his/her usual writing environment, and isn’t putting anything on

paper (or keying anything into a computer file). ‘Steeping’ is a sub-conscious incubating move, where the writer pushes thoughts of the writing project out of his/her mind, and lets his/her brain work on it itself. When the writer goes back to his/her normal writing environment, he/she might find that the brain has moved the project forward.

A word of caution is necessary here. Incubating is not the same as procrastinating. Incubating is a constructive (and for some writers, necessary) Mode of writing. Procrastinating, on the other hand, is the active avoidance of engaging in any Mode or Move of writing. Some incubating may well happen while a writer is procrastinating, but they are not the same thing.

Although these five modes were what predominantly presented themselves in the data, the distinction between the modes is not always clear-cut. There is some overlap, and there were some writing moves that were not easily categorised. For example, a writer might go into Unloading Mode in order to Explore something he/she needs to clarify in his/her own mind. An overlap between Structuring and Polishing modes would be the move when a writer carefully re-words and re-works a sentence to make it sound just right for a reader. The categories, therefore, are not perfect, but the imperfections did not pose a problem for the writers.

The five modes of writing (represented as cones in the figures above) fit together to form a circle that encompasses all the Modes of the writing process (Figure 7). To represent the non-linear, and seemingly

random sequence of moving through the modes to the finished product, an arrow, such as on the spinner of a board game, was added to the centre of the circle. This also illustrates that there is no definite beginning Mode. This is important, as many models of the writing process all but dictate that a writer must start with exploring. This was not, however, found to be true by the WD group members. One writer started, instead, with a publishing move “I couldn’t really do anything, so I made my title page and set my margins.” Nor do writers always start out in the same Mode: “for [one assignment] I started with exploring, for [the other assignment] I incubated first”.

Thus, one might start the writing process in much the same way as one starts a board game—by spinning an arrow, and seeing on which colour it lands, then moving to that colour space.

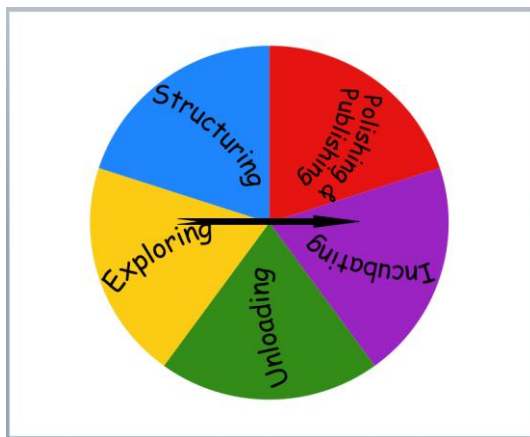


Figure 7: The Five Modes of Writing

The way writers move through the modes may be different for each writer, or different for the same writer for different writing projects. Not all writers work through all modes (one member wrote that she did not have any Unloading in her writing process). The time and energy spent in each Mode is not necessarily in equal proportions (presumably, most writers spend a great deal more time in Structuring Mode than in Publishing & Polishing Mode, for example).

The whole writing process, then, is represented in Figure 8. The writing process is linear in that it has a starting point, and progresses through to a finishing point (which is, in most cases, a deadline). The way a writer moves from the start to the finish, however, is recursive, moving back and forth, and round and round

through different modes, inching forward until the piece of writing is as complete as it is going to be.

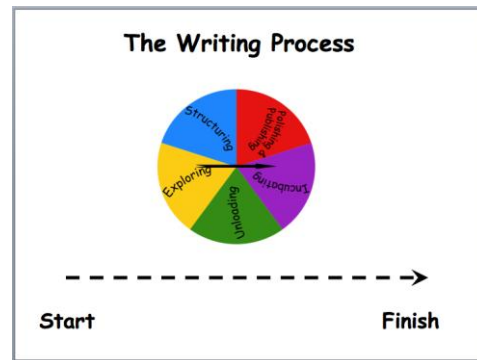


Figure 8: The Writing Process

**The perceived benefits of using the by writers-for-writers model**

Unfortunately, the second term was nearly finished by the time the model evolved to its present state, so there was not a lot of time to see how it could be used by writers. There was, however, data from members’ reflective journals to indicate that there was some metacognitive awareness developing via the model:

“I think it is a good idea to think of one’s writing process and way of writing. It helps a lot to know where you are now and where you want to be next; moreover having a model helps you to reflect on it better....a model helps students/writers focus on what they are really doing, you know, naming the steps they take, trying to put into words what we usually don’t think about. This way it can help us find solutions for parts we’re struggling with.”

There were also some incidents in the recorded data showing that writers were using the meta-language of the model to talk about the writing process, and to take control of that process:

“I must be incubating...I woke up in the middle of the night with an idea about [my assignment] isn’t that weird?!”

“I was stuck...and I finally figured out why...I [needed] to structure first...so I made an outline, and then I was able to freewrite again within the structure.”

Some members also noted that going through the process of making the model helped them not only understand their own process, but understand that the process could be different for each person; they believed that this understanding would

benefit them in their future careers as ESOL teachers:

"[Making and using the model] will make me a better teacher when I ever have to teach writing".

### Ways Forward...

The participants in this study all agreed that they benefited from participating in a writers' group throughout their MA course:

"There's no way we could have done it - and kept sane - without the workshops. I don't know how the others [who weren't in the workshop] did it."

One of the benefits of participation was this collaborative construction of the writing process model. Although the limited data indicates the model might be empowering for the writers who made it, and although when I have presented the model at various conferences, it has always resonated with the audiences, it is necessary to "test" the writing process model that was constructed by this group: Would it be useful with other writers? More importantly, would it be useful for writers in raising awareness of their own writing process, and subsequently help them take control of that process? If so, how?

Other questions to investigate would be whether or not there is any consistent pattern as to what kinds of feedback are generally preferred by writers, or more useful to writers, in certain Modes of writing. Or, in the spirit of by-writers-for-writers, would this model best serve simply as a point of departure for other writers/groups to construct their own, different, models?

If these questions could be explored, the answers may have implications for academic writers, and particularly academic writers who are training to be teachers of English academic writing—helping ensure that the writing process is less of a mystery, and more something that writers can understand and take charge of.

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