

1-2001

## Focus on Writing: Collaborative Action Research in the Classroom


Carol Marchel

*Appalachian State University, Boone, NC*

Dianne Whitaker

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Online and Distance Education Commons](#), [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Marchel, C., & Whitaker, D. (2001). Focus on Writing: Collaborative Action Research in the Classroom. *Perspectives In Learning*, 2 (1). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol2/iss1/9>

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by CSU ePress. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives In Learning by an authorized editor of CSU ePress.

## PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING

Volume 2: pp 39

### Focus on Writing: Collaborative Action Research in the Classroom

By C.A. Marchel & D. Whitaker

#### Introduction

In higher education, professors are expected to provide quality instruction, although rewards are often based on research activities. For those who value teaching for its own sake, it is difficult to balance the competing demands of life within academe with the demands of teaching. As teachers, we seek to understand student needs to improve our classroom practice. More importantly, we want to show students how to improve their own skills. This article describes how we combined both research and instruction to improve the quality of instruction while providing students with a way to improve their skills. We utilized this approach in a writing class for graduate students who came from a variety of disciplines, but we believe it could be adapted to other types of courses.

Our course was taught by two (2) professors and a graduate instructor and was collaborative in design. The guiding philosophy was that both instructors and students are learners and that learning is a collaborative venture. In the spirit of collaboration, instructors and students alike participated in the focus groups. Both students and instructors were learners in the classroom, and the use of "we" in this article reflects this dynamic. A further comment: while we are tempted to include more of the rich textual data taken from participants, for economy's sake, we have chosen one or two pieces of text that provide a characteristic sample of the point illustrated.

#### Action Research, Focus Groups, and Writing

Our research is informed by three sources: 1) action researchers, particularly those who address group learning with a focus on dialogue (Isaacs 1993; Senge 1990); 2) focus group theorists (Bruner and Guzman 1989; Krueger 1998; Morgan 1988); and 3) those who write about the writing process (Becker 1986; Henson 1994; Wolcott 1990). Each of these influences is described below in more detail. In this study, focus groups were used as an instructional tool and as a research method to gather information about how people engage in professional writing. The work can be framed within a participatory action research format, in which participants learned from sharing their experiences about writing with other group members so that all can improve their writing skills. Data was gathered in the form of class notes, course papers, and audio recordings of the focus groups.

#### Action Research

Action research has a long history and has taken many forms. As Noffke (1996) points out, action research is used increasingly within education in a variety of ways, including teacher in-service, teacher training, school reform, and in proposals for educational research grants. Within the broad context of action research, there are those who seek to improve learning and instruction through using action research. For some within this last group, action research is an ongoing reflective and collaborative process in which people learning together use dialogue to improve personal skills (Reason 1994; Senge 1990). Research, teaching, and learning are intermingled in this approach, with a strong emphasis on learning by doing. As learners learn more by doing and sharing what they know with others, all group members benefit from hearing the experiences of all in the group. Cycles of action, reflection/dialogue, and planning are ongoing in collaborative learning approaches.



The cycles of action, reflection/dialog and planning were the framework of our undertaking. As group members experimented with their own writing and shared their experiences with others, all benefited from what individuals learned. By keeping track of experiences over the course of the semester, participants learned both by doing and through engaging in dialog with other participants. Reflection was encouraged and fostered by group dialog.

### ***Focus Groups***

Focus groups can be thought of as group interviews in which small groups, often six (6) to eight (8) people, talk about an issue of mutual interest. A moderator is typically used to provide guidance around a pre-determined set of questions (Morgan 1998). Focus groups are useful both as a means of collecting information from groups of people and as a supplement to both qualitative and quantitative methodology (Morgan 1988; Morgan 1998). Although frequently used in marketing research, focus groups have been used in a variety of other ways. They are useful in getting information efficiently from a group of people (Krueger 1998; Morgan 1988). Focus groups have been used in higher education to improve individual courses (Chang 1996), programs (Beard and Danielson 1992), broad-scale university course work (Wright and Herdershott 1992) and statewide university curricula (Polen, Gottini, and Suarez 1993).

An advantage of using focus groups in our course was that participants were encouraged to interact with each other rather than to respond to an interviewer. We believed participants would feel more comfortable sharing information when the spotlight was not on them alone, and also that they would be able to learn from each other. Although the researcher has less control over what information is gathered in a focus group than with individual interviews, our purpose was to allow participants to share their own experiences in an open manner. Therefore less control over the process was not seen as a limiting factor in our study. Focus groups are economical in terms of time, and for us, they took up little more than three (3) hours of class time for the semester. Most importantly, the focus group format allowed our participants to value the experiences of their peers while at the same time, realizing that everyone struggles with the writing process.

### ***Writing***

One purpose of our class was to focus on the process of writing, and we were guided by the work of authors such as Harvey Wolcott and Harold Becker. Works by these authors were used as texts for the class (Becker 1986; and Wolcott 1990). According to these writers and others (Henson 1995; Zinsser 1994), people often adopt uniquely different approaches to writing. Writing is an emotional experience (Brand 1987, 1990; Lieberman 1987) and writers engage in a variety of personal writing rituals (Becker 1986; Dobie 1988). We believed that by exploring and experimenting with personal approaches and rituals, our student-writers could strengthen their skills. We also believed that by examining and recognizing emotional responses to writing in a safe environment, writers could gradually change to become more comfortable with the act of writing. This study was designed to learn if changes in writing and the process served as a tool to promote increased ease and facility with professional writing.

### ***Five Minutes a Day***

The study took place in a graduate class at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville; College of Education entitled "Writing for Professional Publication," in the Spring of 1997. Participants were the sixteen (16) students enrolled in the class, and the three (3) co-instructors. For three (3) six- daytime periods during the semester, all participants completed an activity in which they wrote for five minutes a day. In addition to the five minutes of writing, participants completed a record about their writing, keeping track of what the writing activity was, where it took place, at what time it took place, and any personal feelings about the writing. Participants were told that this was a self-discovery



activity aimed at learning about personal writing styles, habits, and preferences. At the end of the week, participants met in class to share what they learned and experienced during this activity.

Focus groups were used as a forum to share dialog within the class believing this provided a safe environment in which to discuss personal writing. As class meetings continued throughout the semester, we predicted that the relationships developed among class members would enhance the feeling of safety. We hoped that participants would share not only personal feelings, but would also suggest possible strategies for improving writing skills. Both class participants and instructors participated in the groups, with instructors acting as facilitators as needed. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed and the instructors analyzed the transcriptions text. The identity of the participants was kept confidential and all participants agreed to have the focus groups recorded and transcribed.

### *A Life of its Own: The Emotion of Writing*

A brief review of writing about writing is in order here. The literature on writing at first focused on the product. The Elements of Style written by William Strunk, Jr. in 1919 and revised by E. B. White deals primarily with topics such as rules of usage and the elements of composition. Later cognitive processes (Hayes and Flower 1980) and social construction (Brandt 1992) were recognized as important elements in writing. However, theorists have been slow to incorporate the emotional experience of writing. Brand (1987) has called for current writing theory to deal with the affective domains such as emotion and motivation. Lieberman (1987) characterized the emotional detachment of academic prose as an "illusion."

Certainly a review of the notes from our focus groups supports the idea that writing is, at least for many, an emotional experience. Quite often, writing was experienced as painful, as is the case when a writer began a writing task or reached a "block." Focus group transcripts suggest that this was true for some participants throughout the semester, while others got past the pain later in the course. The following comments were indicative of this emotional response:

*On Friday I sat down and redid a part of it, and that felt fine. I was in the mood for it, and then Sunday I came back to it, and oh, it was painful. I didn't want to deal with it. It's like I was just not in the right mood to deal with it. I can't really explain it, Bryan, in the second focus group.*

The emotional experience is not always a negative experience. Participants in our study often found writing to be exhilarating, calming, or an activity that was (or became) a comfortable part of their routine. Mary is an example. She reports about her writing in the first focus group:

*So you come up with little things . . . and it sets a nice tone for the rest of the day. Sort of calm or happy.*

For some people and at some times the writing act is experienced as both painful and pleasant. In the third focus group, Bryan described how this happened in his own writing,

*Well, it's, sometimes there's an anger or a frustration and then you can move on to another phase and it's going OK, and then the frustration and anger may come back. I mean to me it's not 'Oh just everything's wonderful,' and I'm scribbling away. It's a beautiful day. I mean, it seems to have a life of its own. .*

For many of us, Bryan's description of writing as having a life of its own rings true. We experience writing as if it were an entity that causes fear, dread, pleasure, or calmness. Writing can be as formidable as an enemy when we are "blocked" and overtakes us when we "go with the flow." The emotional nature of writing was something experienced by all participants to one degree or another and we saw further support for the idea that writing is for many, an emotional process.



### **Writing Rituals: Tea and Thunderstorms**

Writing is an act often surrounded by ritual. Dobie (1988) found that almost all students had rituals and that frequently they were unproductive. Becker (1986) writes about the ritual of the "clean page." We spent considerable time in our first focus group trying to discover what rituals were connected with our writing. Ideas about writing as well as the context in which we write becomes ritualized. We found that one of the common perceptions of many of the writers in our course was that there was a "right" way to write. This often served as a block to further writing and no doubt contributed to the emotional responses many had to their writing. Statements like the following ones were not uncommon in our dialog about our personal writing experiences:

*If I have an idea in my mind and it just doesn't sound right yet, I can't go on to the next paragraph or the next part until---I may not get it to where it needs to be, but it needs to be somewhere, Anne, describing a writing block, first focus group.*

Along with thinking that there is a "right" way to write, we frequently adopted a "right" context in which to write. We identified preferences for certain places to write, for certain times, for specific sounds or only after certain activities. What worked for one writer hindered another. The following excerpts illustrate some of the writing rituals we discussed.

*Oh I'm a Trekkie, so I listen to Startrek soundtrack or and I also have a thunderstorm CD that I'll just turn it on and I'll turn it up as loud as it will go because it's soft and just like a rainstorm. And there's one big clap of thunder right in the middle of it, [Anne, first focus group].*

*(I need) something to drink. Tea, whatever, iced tea, [Tom first focus group.]*

### **Changing: Getting Beyond the Little Pieces**

Focus group texts supported that many of us had rituals in our writing and that all of us experienced writing as an emotional act. Analysis of the focus group texts also showed that participants learned from hearing the writing experiences of their peers. Not only did writers indicate they tried a technique a class member had shared, but they looked forward to the support they received from peers. Susan's comment reflects both the help and the support she valued in the focus group structure:

*Yeah, the comments were helpful and I remember sitting in the computer lab thinking, 'Now I have to wait a whole other week now (until we meet again)'.*

The design of the activity itself was also helpful, since writing for just five minutes was viewed as less intimidating than writing for longer blocks of time. Participants who usually dreaded writing began to see it could be less intimidating and furthermore, that the five minutes could be used to write for other writing tasks. Lisa echoed several others when she said,

*I'd never paid attention to it before, and like Sam and George, I was amazed at what I was able to do in five minutes . . .*

In comparing focus group texts from the end of the semester to the earlier texts, we learned that participants moved from exploring writing rituals toward experimenting with changing those rituals. Some changed their definition of writing, realizing that editing was as much a part of writing as forming words on paper. Some began to make small writing goals or targets, focusing on just one small part of a larger project. Some tried writing in different places and at different times. The biggest change, however, was at the psychological level, including attitudes toward writing and toward ourselves as writers. As Rhonda said about her writing during the last focus group:

*. . . to me it's the more psychological than it is a technical thing. And I guess I can see that (the) exercise as a way of dealing a little bit for five minutes and then you add more and add more, but I find it so . . . the psychological piece. If I could just get past that little piece, then I could move on.*



## Summary

Findings showed that both the "Five-minute Exercise" and the use of focus groups were helpful in improving writing in a number of ways: 1) The emotional aspects of writing were muted when writers realized they need only write for five minutes; 2) Writers saw that even five minutes could be used productively and could generalize to other writing tasks; 3) When writers share their own experiences around writing, their peers learn techniques they might apply to their own writing; and, 4) Talking about writing in a group provides support for what may otherwise be an isolating and more intimidating experience.

Applications of this exercise go beyond the writing group we describe here. For situations where writers are not able to share this process with a group, individuals can likely gain from trying their own "Five-Minute Exercise." In addition, the technique is one that can be shared with students of writing as one to help overcome emotions that sometimes block writing. It takes little time and can be easily adapted to a variety of writing situations. As a research tool, the "Five-Minute Exercise" is a quick way to gather information about personal writing in a way that can be used to improve writing. And finally, focus groups serve as a way to share ideas and experiences about writing, as a method to record information that can be used in research, and also act as a vehicle to support writers as they struggle with the writing process.

## References

- Beard, P. & Danielson, S. 1993. Teacher to teacher: A dialogue on the "art" of teaching English. Portland State U.: Academic Alliance Program (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 354 531).
- Becker, H. S. 1986. Writing for social scientists. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brand, A. G. 1987. The why of cognition: Emotion and the writing process. College Composition and Communication, 38:436-443.
- Brand, A. G. 1990. "Social cognition, emotions, and the psychology of writing." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 41st, Chicago, IL.
- Brandt, D. 1992. The cognitive as the social: An ethnomethodological approach to writing process research. Written Communication, 9:315-355.
- Chang, G. C. (with others). 1996. Focus group report: Seminar in college teaching. College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland, Counseling Center.
- Dobie, A. B. 1988. "Writing rituals." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 39th, St. Louis, MO.
- Hayes, J. R., & Flower, L. S. 1980. Identifying the organization of the writing process. In Cognitive processes in writing, ed. L. W. Gregg & E. R. Steinberg, 3-30. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Henson, K. T. 1995. The art of writing for publication. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Isaacs, W. 1993. Taking flight: Dialogue, collective thinking, and organizational learning. Organizational Dynamics, 22, (2):24-39.
- Krueger, R. A. 1998. Analyzing and reporting focus group results. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lieberman, D. 1987. "The significance of structure." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 38th, Atlanta, GA.
- Morgan, D. L. 1988. Focus groups as qualitative research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, D. L. 1998. The focus group guidebook. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Noffke, S. 1996. Professional, personal, and political dimensions of action research. Review of Research in Education, 22:305-343.
- Polen, D., Gottini, N., & Suarez, T. 1993. Implementation of the second major requirement for teacher education majors. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Chapel Hill, College of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. 372 068).
- Reason, P. 1994. Three approaches to participative inquiry. In Handbook of qualitative research, ed. N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, 324-336. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Senge, P. 1990. The fifth discipline. NY: Currency/Doubleday.
- Wolcott, H. 1990. Writing up qualitative research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.



Wright, S. & Hendershott, A. (1992). Using focus groups to obtain students' perceptions of general education. In D. H. Wulff & J. D. Nyquist (Eds.), Resources for Faculty, Instructional, & Organizational Development (pp. 78-99). Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.

Zinsser, W. (1994). On writing well, 5th Ed. NY: Harper-Collins.

---

Dr. Carol Marchel is an Adjunct Assistant Professor in Psychology at Appalachian State University, Boone NC. Her research interests include action research, consultation in school psychology, and grading practices in higher education.

Dr. Dianne Whitaker is a former Assistant Professor in the Psychoeducational Studies Unit, University of Tennessee-Knoxville. She is currently a practicing School Psychologist with the Port Angeles School District, Port Angeles, WA.

