Guest Author

In every edition of *Research in Teacher Education* we publish a contribution from a guest writer who has links with the Cass School of Education and Communities. David Wray taught in primary schools in the United Kingdom for 10 years and is currently Professor Emeritus at the University of Warwick. He has served as President of the United Kingdom Reading Association, and edited the journal of that Association for 8 years. He has published over 50 books and over 150 chapters and articles on aspects of literacy teaching and is best known for his work on developing teaching strategies to help students access the curriculum through literacy. His major publications include: *Extending Literacy* (Routledge); *Developing Children's Non-Fiction Writing* (Scholastic); *Literacy in the Secondary School* (Fulton) and *Teaching Literacy Effectively* (Routledge Falmer). More recently he has begun new research programs exploring the importance and teaching of handwriting, renewing the concept of readability and evaluating the educational use of mobile learning devices. In this article David explores some of the background to this problem and reports an investigation into the self-perceived competence in writing of teachers in training.

'I was never much good at writing': trainee teachers' attributions in writing

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Abstract

It might be thought that, in order to successfully teach a skill or process to others, teachers would need to be fairly competent in that process themselves, and fairly confident in their competence. There is evidence, however, that, in the case of the teaching of writing, this may not actually be true. This article explores some of the background to this problem and reports an investigation into the self-perceived competence in writing of teachers in training. It goes on to argue that, in the attributions these young teachers make about their success or failure in writing, there are important implications for the teaching and development of writing.

Keywords: teachers in training; teacher educators; attribution theory;

Introduction

I recently had a long discussion with one of my university students about the teaching of writing. This discussion took place during what will be a familiar process for most teacher trainers nowadays: the setting of targets for the student to aim at during a forthcoming period of school placement. Much of our meeting was unremarkable, until the student dropped into the conversation that she found teaching writing quite a difficult part of her teaching because, and I quote, she 'was never much good at writing'. This sparked off a discussion between us about whether she could actually teach young people to write if she was not 'much good at writing' herself. Since this meeting, I have thought more deeply about what disturbed me about this student's admission that she 'was never much good at writing'. I realised that I have probably been under the delusion for a number of years that all university students would be confident writers, if only because in order to get into a university they will have had to demonstrate some fairly advanced writing skills in their specialist subjects.

For students training to be teachers, such confidence seemed even more natural as, after all, it would not be long until they would be in school classrooms and responsible for developing the writing skills of young learners of their own.

My delusion is perhaps best summed up by the contention of Slifkin (1997) that 'The idea of a "non-writer" teaching students to write well is as implausible as being taught to drive by someone who has never been behind the wheel' (p. 89). Yet apparently it is not the case that all new teachers enter their first classrooms with high amounts of confidence in themselves as writers or as teachers of writing. Draper et al. (2000) conclude from their research that 'teacher educators cannot assume that their students are readers and writers, nor can they presume that their students hold a love of reading and writing' (p. 193).

It was to answer the question of why this might be that the research described in this article was carried out. The aim of this research was simple. It was to find out:

- To what extent do trainee teachers have confidence in themselves as writers?
- To what do they attribute their confidence (or lack of confidence)?
- Are there any differences in these attributions depending on trainee teacher characteristics?
- What do the views of trainee teachers tell us about the successful teaching of writing?

A theory of attributions

What reasons do trainee teachers give for their views about themselves as writers? Attribution theory (Weiner 1986) provides a useful framework for examining this question. Attribution theory considers individuals' beliefs about the reasons for their successes and failures and how these beliefs influence their expectations and future behaviour (Alderman 2004). 'Ability' and 'effort' are the two attributions most frequently given for success and failure by learners in schools (Graham & Weiner 1993). These can also be used as attributions for writing success. Some learners (and some teachers) will believe that writing is a 'gift', a kind of innate creative ability that needs only the right environment to flower. Others, both learners and teachers, will believe writing is a skill that can be learned through effort (Palmquist & Young 1992). Attributions can also be classified along a dimension known as the 'locus of causality' (Weiner 1992). 'External' or 'situational' attribution assigns a cause to an outside factor. A learner may, for example, attribute his/her lack of success in writing to having a poor teacher, or to not having an appropriate physical environment in which to write. 'Internal' or 'dispositional' attribution assigns a cause to factors within the person. A successful writer may, for example, attribute success to native intelligence or to hard work.

Attribution theory has tended to suggest that people interpret their environment in such a way as to maintain a positive self-image. That is, they will attribute their successes or failures to factors that will enable them to feel as good as possible about themselves. In general, this means that when learners succeed at an academic task, they are likely to want to attribute this success to their own efforts or abilities, but when they fail, they will want to attribute their failure to factors over which they have no control, such as bad teaching or bad luck.

Research has suggested, however, an interesting gender effect in terms of people's causal attributions, and several studies have shown that males and females tend to advance different explanations for their successes and failures. Women are more likely to attribute their successes to external factors (eg luck) and their failures to internal factors (eg lack of ability). Men, on the other hand, tend to attribute their successes to internal factors and their failures to external factors (Top 1991; Ashkanasy 1994). In terms of writing, therefore, one might expect that men who experience success as a writer will advance explanations such as, 'I'm good at this,' or 'I work really hard at it.' Women experiencing similar success are more likely to say things like 'I was lucky the topic was something I knew about,' or 'I've had lots of help with this sort of thing in the past.'

The process of writing

Although research into the processes and pedagogies of writing has always been quantitatively less than that into the equivalent aspects of reading, a number of theoretical descriptions of the writing process have emerged from research over the past 30 years. These can be classified as cognitive, socio-cultural and constructivist in nature.

Cognitive attempts to understand writing have included the influential model developed by Flower & Hayes (1980), and the expert–novice distinctions advanced by Bereiter & Scardamalia (1987). Flower (1994) subsequently attempted to inject some socio-cultural insights into a description of the writing process and its development, but this movement was to an extent overshadowed by the socio-functional work of linguists such as Martin (1985) and Kress & Knapp (1982), who, under the broad heading of 'genre theory', anchored writing to its social purposes. In terms of influence upon writing pedagogy, however, the most salient influence has been that derived from the work of researchers such as Graves (1983) and Calkins (1994) (summarised in Wyse 1998) which

focused on the ways that writers, especially younger writers, constructed the activity and purpose of writing. Their focus was on the 'internal' nature of writing and the process whereby writers produced texts. Central to what became known as the process approach was the notion of composition as an act of personal 'meaning-making'.

Researchers operating within this 'process writing' paradigm tend to see writing, like learning, as a meaning-making process which facilitates the learner's ability to ask questions, discover connections and find answers (Langer & Applebee 1987). Writers' first drafts are initial attempts to think on paper. From there, they engage in a process of elaboration and clarification as they go about the process of making meaning. The more writers work with their ideas, the more they are able to revise, rethink, and clarify their thoughts (Murray 1980). The 'internal' nature of writing has been discussed by other authors who elevate the role of the learner over that of the teacher. For example, Houston (2004) uses both musical and sports-related analogies to make her point. She explains, 'Playing a musical instrument cannot be taught… My athletic friends tell me that playing a sport can only be learned as well. Writing is like these activities. It can only be learned by the writer' (pp. 6–7). Similarly, Berthoff (1982) reflects on the limitations of writing instruction by drawing a parallel between woodworking and writing. She contends, 'Up to a point, writing can be explained and taught as a skill. And it can be demonstrated, as dovetailing the joints of a drawer can be demonstrated… but woodcraft is not just assembling some pre-cut forms, nor is wordcraft gluing statements together. Composing… requires more than skill' (p. 11).

According to this perspective, therefore, attributions of writing ability ought to be primarily internal. External influences, such as schools or teachers, ought to have a role only as facilitating contexts. Seen in this way, it would not be a problem, then, for a teacher of writing not actually to be any good at it. His/her teaching expertise would rest on the ability to provide contexts which support the writing of learners.

The study

Subjects

This study involved the 52 student teachers who were completing their final year of a four-year teacher training degree course at a university in the United Kingdom. Of these trainees, 31 were English specialists and 52 were specialists in either mathematics or science.

In this context, being a specialist meant having a pre-university qualification (usually an A-level) in the relevant subject, and having elected to follow a course of teacher training which, alongside the preparation it offered for general primary school teaching, also aimed to prepare students to exercise a subject leadership role in their later employment as teachers.

Unfortunately, as this group of 52 students included only one male (a fairly familiar situation in primary teacher training programmes in the UK), any cross-gender comparisons were precluded.

Data gathering 1: the questionnaire

A modified version of one section of Palmquist & Young's (1992) writing questionnaire was administered to these students in an attempt to determine their attitudes towards writing. The full instrument from which the items used in this questionnaire were taken included sections enquiring into students' expectations about the writing they would be asked to undertake while at college, and their previous experience of writing. Omitting these sections reduced the questionnaire to ten statements to which students were asked to give Likert scale responses (5 = Strongly Agree, etc).

The statements used are given in Table 1.(See p48)

These are all positive statements, so the most positive response possible to this set of statements would give a cumulative score of 50. A totally neutral cumulative score would be 30 and the most negative cumulative score would be 10.

Questionnaire results

The mean score of these 52 students was 18.79 (total score 977), suggesting quite negative attitudes towards writing among the group as a whole. Comparing English specialists with maths/science specialists gave a different picture. The mean score for the English specialists was 22.61 (total score 701), but for the maths/science specialists it was 13.14 (total score 276).

Thus, although the English specialists were generally a little negative about their writing, this paled into insignificance compared to the negative attitudes of the maths/science specialists. Remember that *all* these students would, at least, be qualified to teach writing to primary school children the following year.

Table 1. Perceptions of writing

What do you think about writing?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I write whenever I can					
2. I am able to express myself clearly in my writing.					
3. Writing is a lot of fun.					
4. I think I am good at writing.					
5. I enjoy writing.					
6. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.					
7. Compared to other students, I am a good writer.					
8. Teachers who have read my writing think I am a good writer.					
9. Other students who have read my writing think I am a good writer.					
10. My writing is easy to understand.					

Table 2. Attribution statements

Attribution statements made	No. made by HSW group	% of total made by	No. made by LSW	% of total made by
Referring to ability	12	21.43	18	40.91
Referring to effort	18	32.14	16	36.36
Referring to influential others	26	46.43	10	22.73
Total	56	100	44	100

On inspecting the data, it was apparent that, while the overall picture was of a slightly, or severely in some cases, negative attitude towards writing, there were several students who bucked this trend. Nine students had cumulative scores of 34 or over on the attitude scale. There was then a 15-point gap to the tenth highest scoring student. These nine students had a mean score of 41.11 (total score 370) and they were designated the High Self-assessing Writers (HSW) group. Eight of these students were English specialists and one a science specialist. They were matched with the nine lowest-scoring students (six maths and three science specialists), who had a mean score of 11.89 (total score 107). These students were designated the Low Self-assessing Writers (LSW) group.

Both HSW and LSW groups were then invited to be involved in the second phase of the study. All agreed.

Data gathering 2: the interview

The 18 students in the HSW and LSW groups were each individually interviewed. Interviews were conducted in naturalistic settings and began with a general discussion of the students' feelings about writing. They were then asked a number of specific questions:
- You've told me that you feel fairly positive/negative about yourself as a writer. Can you tell me of any reasons for these feelings?
- Can you think of any experiences in your past, either at home, school or elsewhere, that have had a strong influence on your abilities as a writer?

- So what do you think is the cause of your current writing ability?

Interview results

Students' answers to these questions were subsequently analysed using a simple content analysis approach. This analysis revealed that the frequency of attributional references made by HSW and LSW groups tended to follow different patterns.

The HSW group referred to 'influential other people' most often, followed by 'effort', with 'ability' ranking third. For the LSW group this order was reversed: they referred most often to 'ability', then to 'effort', and to 'influential other people' least of all. The figures can be seen in Table 2.

Attributions made to ability

Of the 44 attributional statements made by the LSW group, 18 (40.9%) referred to 'ability'. The tone of these responses was predominantly negative. For example, one low self-assessing participant said, '*I don't believe I'm a good writer. I really don't know how to structure sentences, or where to use punctuation. And because of that what I write is really never understood.*' A second student explained, '*I'm not a good writer because I'm a horrible speller, and I don't know my punctuation, and I'm not very creative when it comes to writing.*' Finally, a third participant commented, '*I don't see myself as a good writer because I can never think of the best words to use. I often have incorrect grammar and I just can't seem to learn that.*'

On the other hand, of the 56 attributional statements made by the HSW group, only 12 (21.43%) referred to 'ability'. The tone of these remarks was, unsurprisingly, more positive. For example, one participant responded, '*I think I'm a pretty good writer. I've always found it quite easy… I can write clearly and creatively*.' A second student said, '*I'm a good writer. I just love writing down my thoughts, and school writing was never a problem*.' A third explained, 'I think that I'm a good writer because I have a lot of creative ideas.'

Attributions made to effort

Sixteen of the attributions made by members of the LSW group (36.36%) referred to 'effort' and, again, the majority of these responses were negative in tone. For example, one student said, '*I try hard with my writing to begin with but I usually get discouraged and more or less give up by the end*.' Another commented, '*I've never really written what I think is a good assignment. I find it hard expressing myself and it's always too much like hard work*.' A third student lamented her lack of ideas, saying, '*I put off assignments for as long as possible. I've tried to change this habit, but I think I'm afraid of writing. Even though I don't do badly in my marks, I waste so much time. I seem to think that the essay will begin to write itself or that some profound idea will hit me and I'd better wait for it. Actually I don't have many profound ideas but I still mess around waiting for them*.'

Eighteen of the attributions made by members of the HSW group (32.14%) referred to 'effort', but in a more positive way. For example, one student said '*One of the reasons I like writing is because it's so satisfying. You put so much energy into it but it feels really good when you print off that final draft*.' The most positive student in the group claimed, '*When I've finished an assignment I don't really care what mark it gets. The best thing is the feeling you get that you've really worked hard, and you do learn a lot from writing*.'

Attributions made to influential others

Very few attributional statements made by members of the LSW group referred to the influence of other people on their writing (ten statements: 22.73%). There were a few mentions of other family members, eg '*I learned how to write in junior school, but my parents had a big influence on helping me learn to write. Specially my mum. She used to get me to leave her notes all the time. I've still got some of them*.' Teachers, on the other hand, came in for some criticism. For example, one student claimed, '*My first English teacher really put me off. All she did was criticise my ideas and my spelling, and she told me her five-year-old could write better than me*.' Another commented on the effects of criticism on her thoughts about her writing. '*I never liked the writing I did at school. Even when I didn't think it was too bad, getting criticism from teachers put me off the whole thing*.'

The views of the HSW group were a real contrast. Of the 56 attributional statements they made, 26 (46.43%) referred to 'influential others', more than to any other cause of their feelings about their writing. References to family members and teachers were predominantly positive. For instance, one student said, '*I basically remember trying to copy my older brother's homework. I loved to watch him do homework before I was in school. So I used to sit on the kitchen table and watch him write and try to copy what he did*.' A second remembered, '*I learned to write through my mum and dad. I would always see them writing down the shopping list and I would ask them what it said*.'

Many of this group talked about the impact of other people's opinions in shaping their beliefs about themselves as writers. For instance, one student explained, '*I think I'm a good writer because my teachers and tutors have told me that*.' A second expressed a similar sentiment, saying, '*Lots of people have told me I'm a good writer, and people have always enjoyed my stories. I met one of my old teachers a few weeks ago and the first thing we talked about was one of the stories I wrote in her class*.'

Conclusion

There are a number of interpretations of these divergent views, but one thing the results of this study suggest is that, for learners who have succeeded in writing, a very salient factor is the role of 'influential others'. These findings highlight the importance of the 'external' component of writing. While the 'internal' aspects of 'ability' and 'effort' were mentioned frequently in the participants' explanations of their successes and failures, the frequency of the references to the 'external' spoke loudly. A number of these trainee teachers referred to positive writing experiences provided by their parents and siblings, but the majority of references to 'influential others' involved teachers. This is a small-scale study, but if this finding were replicated on a wider scale it would have strong pedagogical implications. There is research in a number of fields (eg Azer 2005 in medical education) that indicates the importance of role models to successful learners.

This finding calls into question the notion that writing cannot be taught but, rather, only learned (Thomason 1998), for such language underestimates the pivotal

role of teachers in the creation of apprentice authors. The results of this study suggest the need for a reconsideration of what it means to 'teach' writing. Teaching does not have to include dissemination of concrete facts; rather, teachers 'teach' through their attitudes toward writing, the value they place on writing, and the time devoted to it in the classroom. They also 'teach' writing when their pupils see them engaged in writing of their own.

Attributions made to 'influential others' are classified as 'external', but they may also be uncontrollable. Pupils do not get any say in the kinds of teachers they have. In this case, the control falls out of the hands of the pupils and into the hands of teacher training courses, because they are responsible for educating tomorrow's teachers of writing. Consequently, it becomes imperative that trainee teachers be given the opportunity to gain confidence as writers and as teachers of writing. It is not good enough for a trainee teacher to say '*I was never much good at writing*.' They need to be helped to develop more positive attitudes towards writing, so that they can go on to be positive 'influential others' for the pupils they will later teach.

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