“Rapid writing. . . is my cup of tea”: Adult upgrading students’ use of writing strategies

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Preface

What do you do when you become aware of a situation in your literacy work that is puzzling or problematic? Perhaps you talk about the situation with a colleague, read a book or article about it, or use a trial and error approach to address the problem. A research in practice project starts with the same sorts of puzzling situations but is an opportunity to investigate a situation in more systematic ways.

Through the Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL) Network, eight literacy researchers in practice from across Alberta investigated a range of questions. During an on-line course in 2000, we clarified our questions and developed research proposals. Then, over several months in 2001, we conducted research, using various methods to gather and analyse information. We started to find some answers but also discovered more questions, which fuelled lively discussion when we met in inquiry groups. Improving our practice was a main reason for us to do research, but we found personal benefits to engaging in research as well.

The research in practice process holds challenges as well as benefits, however. Perceptions of research and who "gets to do it," confidence and expectations of self, lack of time, and writing up the research are among the challenges we faced and learned from.

As a member of the RiPAL Network, PamelaYoung investigated questions about adult upgrading students' writing strategies. In this report, Pam describes the research process and shares what she learned.

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Introduction

When adults enrol in high school English courses, they often struggle with assigned writing. For any student, "self esteem will be deeply engaged when the topic of instruction is composition" (Trembley, 1993, p. 4). For adult upgrading students, whose "self-esteem is [often] neither very positive nor very solid" (Trembley, p. 4), writing of any sort can feel threatening, particularly when students recall previous unpleasant experiences with school-assigned writing. Perhaps as a result of their shaky self-esteem and negative memories, upgrading students also tend to be "overly concerned with their lack of ability at creative or self-expressive writing [and] dismayed by . . . difficulties . . . with the actual tools of written discourse such as spelling, punctuation and grammar" (Green, 1997, p. 5). As well, students may be "unfamiliar with many of the highly valued genres of schools" (Green, 1997, p. 5), such as literary writing, and therefore may struggle to express their ideas.

As the instructor for an English learning strategies course, I have been acutely aware of my students' challenges with writing. After listening to students describe their writing difficulties, observing their processes and evaluating their final written products, I have offered students ideas for approaching their writing more strategically. Although they have verbally endorsed the strategies I suggested, I have been concerned that students were not applying what I was teaching to their writing assignments. Also, since my suggestions were rooted in the methods I would use to remedy problems in my own writing, I began to wonder if I was making assumptions about the "best" strategies to teach based on personal learning preferences and biases. Smith-Burke, Parker and Deegan (1987) stress that in adult literacy there is an "obvious need for empirical studies to support and/or challenge our beliefs" (p. 9). Therefore, I undertook a study to discover what writing strategies students were using and whether these strategies helped them to succeed in their writing assignments.

Related Literature on Cognitive, Metacognitive and Writing Strategies for Adult Upgrading Students

Cognitive strategies help "process and transform information" and "assist the learner [to] actively engage in the knowledge acquisition process" (McCrindle and Christensen, 1995, p. 170). Weinstein and Mayer (1986) have identified three types of cognitive strategies: rehearsal strategies, which involve the repetition of the information to be learned; organization strategies, which rearrange information to be learned to make it more meaningful; and elaboration strategies, which link new and previously acquired information (as cited by McCrindle and Christensen, pp. 170-171). Although there is little research related specifically to adult upgrading students' use of cognitive strategies, studies with college and university students indicate that cognitive strategy use for any academic task has a "direct and specific impact on learning" (McCrindle and Christensen, p. 170), such as increased academic success (Dwyer, Tomei and Mohr, 2000) and lower student attrition (Doyle and Garland, 2001).

Students also require metacognitive strategies in order to succeed academically. Wiles (1997) reports that two themes have emerged in the research about metacognition. The first defines metacognition as "knowledge of one's own cognitive states and processes [which] also includes one's self-appraisal of one's own abilities" (p. 16). The second theme views metacognition as "self-management . . . the ability . . . to plan, monitor and revise, or . . . control . . . learning" (p. 17). Wiles (1997), Garner (1990), Braten (1993) and Palmer, Alexander and Olson-Dinges (1999) have also discussed the affective component inherent in increased cognitive and metacognitive awareness. They believe that "without high self-esteem and the tendency to attribute success and failure to their level of effort . . . adults are unlikely to initiate or persist at strategic activity" (Garner, 1990, p. 521). However, what McCrindle and Christensen (1995) call a "reciprocal relationship" exists between cognitive and metacognitive strategy use, self-esteem and attributional beliefs. Increased metacognitive awareness and control "presumably lead to positive feelings of pride and satisfaction . . . promote cognitive courage and persistence in the face of

failure and may, eventually, enhance performance on a range of cognitive tasks" (Braten, 1993, p. 223).

It would seem, then, that introducing students to cognitive strategies and metacognitive control of these strategies would produce positive outcomes for their writing. However, little research has been done in the area of writing strategies for adult upgrading students. An ERIC search combining the terms "writing strategies" and "adult education" resulted in only a few articles. None of these involved the writing strategies actually used by adult upgrading students or student feedback on the effectiveness of various writing strategies. However, some of the research about the characteristics of adult basic education writers may be useful when considering which strategies might be most effective in helping them improve their writing.

Schwertman and Corey (1989) learned that ABE writers "go through many of the same developmental stages as children" (p. 47), including invented spelling, letter reversal, sub-vocalizing while writing and a tendency to "focus on their own meaning with little awareness of making their ideas explicit to an outside audience" (pp. 47-48). Unlike children, however, and more similar to basic writers in post-secondary programs, they have "more negative feelings and taboos around writing" (p. 48). These feelings lead adult students to be "less willing to experiment and play with language and take risks" (p. 47) and to be highly self-conscious of their spelling and the appearance of their writing. They interrupt their own writing frequently to re-read what they have written and to "hyper-edit" (p. 48). Unlike basic writers in post-secondary programs, adult basic education students are less likely to focus on grammar and tend to write best about "topics of practical or personal concern" (p. 49).

Another finding involves the tendency of basic education students to view writing as more product than process. Students believe that a written text should be "perfect from the beginning, a reflection of the type of writing they believe good writers would turn out "first go" (Green, 1997, p. 4). Trembley (1993) believes that instructors of ABE students must emphasize writing as "more process than event" (p. 6) and tell "the truth about how hard and risky writing is" (p. 6) for almost everyone.

Green (1997), Dwyer (1992) and Ballard (1992) all recommend that instructors not only tell students about the difficulties and risks of writing, but also model these for their students by writing for and with them. Green discovered that by composing text on a computer screen in front of her students, they were able to "see the risks writers take in the mistakes I made, so that they could see that there was more to redrafting texts than merely editing" (p. 5). As Green's students watched her writing unfold, they began to "give up their obsession with surface features . . . and [come] to the realization that writing is always a struggle, and that constructing, clarifying and revising written texts are the most important tasks" (pp. 5-6).

The Study

Context

I undertook this study in the large urban college where I teach. The college provides upgrading to a diverse population of adult learners. Its high school English classes follow the provincial curriculum, which focusses on reading and responding to literature. The classes are taught by certified teachers.

Before beginning the study, I submitted to the college an outline addressing the goal of the research and my methods, as well as a copy of the letter of informed consent I would have the research participants sign. I also agreed to share my results with the college when I completed the study.

Participants for the study were enrolled in an English Strategies course which I taught. Offered through the Learning Support Services department, English Strategies emphasizes independent learning by introducing students to cognitive strategies for dealing with the assignments in their high school English classes. It also helps students to increase their metacognitive awareness and control of these strategies. Students are identified as possible candidates for English Strategies in one of three ways: 1) referral to the Learning Support Services department on admission to the college as a result of a psycho-educational assessment indicating a learning disability; 2) referral by an English instructor who has noted learning difficulties; or

3) student self-referral. Learning Support Services' personnel then screen all candidates to assure their suitability for and interest in taking the course.

I have taught English Strategies for seven years, revising and refining its content and my teaching approach in response to student feedback, professional reading and in-services. Cognitive strategies for reading, writing, test-taking and stress management comprise a majority of time in the course. I model the use of these strategies and the metacognitive processes for monitoring their use. I also provide many opportunities for students to practise the strategies and reflect on, discuss and evaluate their own metacognitive skills. Since I believe in a process approach to writing, the writing strategies I teach help students to focus on writing for meaning first and to address structural and mechanical issues later.

Part of the students' mark in English Strategies is based on their strategy discussion in a weekly reflective journal. Trembley (1993) comments that journals give learners a "decisive hand in discovering not only what they need to learn but also why and how they need to learn it" (p. 19). I ask students to record what they have learned each week in both their English and English Strategies classes and to discuss their strategy use and its effectiveness. I respond to all students' writing by praising their accomplishments, validating their frustration when they experience setbacks, offering suggestions for new strategies to try and posing questions that may further their metacognitive processes.

Students are introduced to reflective journal writing during the first week of class. I distribute a written explanation of the reasons for and benefits of journal writing and explain the marking procedures (see Appendices 2 and 3 for introductory letter and mark sheet). The journal comprises 15% of the students' final grade. In order to receive a mark of 5/5 for a journal entry, students must first describe and respond to their regular English class activities and assignments as well as the strategies I have taught in class that week. Then, they must discuss what strategies they have used to approach their English class tasks and evaluate these strategies. They may also write about strategies they tried in other subjects and in out-of-school tasks.

Although I initially introduced journals to promote student accountability in using the strategies and thinking about their impact, I was soon struck by the wealth of detail about strategy use that students were providing in their journals. I also realized that this information was too valuable not to be shared with a wider audience. The journals provided the data needed to address my question about students' use of writing strategies.[1]

The participants

At the end of one twenty-week English Strategies course, I discussed this study with the eighteen students in the class. I invited them to participate in the study if any of their journal entries during the term had received marks of 4/5 or 5/5. Eight students initially indicated their interest and signed letters of informed consent. Two students eventually withdrew from the study; they did not return my phone calls to obtain required information.

The students who participated in this research included four women and two men, ranging in age from 19 to their early forties. Two of the students had immigrated to Canada. One student had sustained a brain injury and three had been diagnosed with a learning disability. The participants had been away from school for varying lengths of time before returning to upgrade and had completed different levels of public school education. All were within the first eighteen months of beginning their upgrading. At the time of the study, three were enrolled in a grade twelve English course, two in a grade eleven course and one in a grade ten course. To protect their identities, I have used pseudonyms in the study.

Using the journals as data

I requested journals that had at least one entry with a mark of 4 or 5 out of 5, as these entries included reflections as well as reports about strategy use. Not all students who had such entries volunteered to participate in the study.

[1] In their journals, students discussed a wide range of strategies for dealing with many types of high school English assignments. Writing strategies are the focus of this paper as one part of a planned larger report. An outline of the strategies for other types of high school English assignments is included in Appendix 4.

The six journals used in this study ranged in length and nature; they did not represent only those students who were the most articulate or prolific journal writers, or even those who used strategies most consistently. Although two students, Maria and Elizabeth, wrote detailed daily entries on their own time which showed extensive strategy use, the other four wrote less descriptive weekly summaries during class time. Three of the students consistently earned marks of 5/5 on their journal entries while the others received scores that ranged from 2/5 to 5/5. Thus, the range of marks among the students in the study was fairly typical of the range among the rest of the students in the class.

Using journals as a data source has several limitations. First, students likely did not capture on paper all the strategies they were using. Frequently, in casual conversations with me inside and outside of class, they discussed strategies they were using but not recording in their journals. Also, it is likely that some strategies in use were never stated, either in writing or speaking. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) and Butler and Winne (1995) believe that "metacognitive knowledge need not be statable to be useful and may not be statable at all in some situations" (as cited by Schraw, 1998, p. 90).

A second limitation of using the journals for data is that the students knew I would be reading their journals each week. Boud (2001) cautions that "the expectation of writing for an external audience can profoundly shape what we write and even what we allow ourselves to consider" (p. 15). Paterson (1995) believes that students "might write what they think the teacher wants to see" (as cited in Kerka, 1996, p. 3) and that an awareness of the teacher as classroom authority may inhibit student voice (Kerka, 1996). Also, the journals were graded, with higher marks being assigned for those that showed more evidence of strategy use and metacognition. Boud (2001) discusses the tension that can develop between assessment and reflection since "students must demonstrate what they know and disguise what they do not know" (p. 16) in order to achieve a higher grade.

Data analysis

Since the question for this study was "What writing strategies do adult upgrading students use, and do these strategies help them to succeed in their writing assignments?," a qualitative approach was the best way to explore the "depth, detail and individual meaning" (Patton, 1990, p. 17) of the students' journal responses. The qualitative approach also allows researchers to capture and describe participants' perspectives (Patton, 1990). McCrindle and Christensen (1995) believe that "the nature of a student's knowledge structures can be assessed using a . . . qualitative analysis of the nature of student learning" (p. 171).

I began to analyze the data by reading each journal to get an overall sense of the students' words. I then highlighted significant statements pertaining to the research question and word-processed each student's significant statements and my interpretation of the statements into two columns. If I was uncertain of a student's meaning, I contacted him or her for clarification. I printed the statements with the interpretations on coloured paper, using a different color for each participant. Then I coded each statement by noting a topic category and sub-category in the margin. For example, students discussed many strategies for generating writing ideas. "Idea generation" became a topic category, with the actual strategies for idea generation, such as rapid writing and asking questions, as subheadings.

Next, I used a revised version of Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) "cut up and put in folders" approach. After cutting all of the statements into strips, I wrote each topic category at the top of a sheet of paper, then placed each statement on the appropriate sheet. I then arranged the statements on each sheet into groups of subcategories, which I also labelled. This method allowed me to physically arrange the statements into meaningful groups. Once I was satisfied with the arrangement, I taped the statement strips to the topic sheets and used these sheets as sources for writing the study.

Findings

Through my analysis, I identified three categories of strategy use for writing: generating ideas, organizing information and writing drafts. As well

as reporting these, I have also included the students' reflections on their use of these strategies to show their metacognitive processes and progress. Occasionally, students mentioned using methods that cannot be directly defined as cognitive strategies. I have included these as suggestions that might be useful to other student writers. Wherever possible, the participants' words form the subheadings in order to honor their writing and reflect their experiences as authentically as possible.

Generating ideas

Students frequently overlook the importance of pre-writing processes. They often plunge directly into their first and sometimes only drafts, striving for structural and mechanical correctness while attempting to "write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes" (Gee, 1989, p. 6). I introduced students to the concept that it is difficult to simultaneously generate ideas and write them coherently and correctly. I used Klauser's (1987) book *Writing on both sides of the brain* as a resource with students to reinforce this idea. Klauser calls the brain's right hemisphere the "creator" and suggests that most writers ignore its playful, imagistic yet soft-spoken input. Instead, they listen to the loud-voiced advice of the logical, rational, left hemisphere "critic." Although there is a time and place to call on the talents of the critic, it is not in the early stages of writing, when over-attention to correctness and format can result in the disappearance of creative ideas.

In class, I gave students opportunites to practise idea generation by visualizing, self-questioning, predicting, using prior experience, and rapid writing, and students reported that they used these strategies. Although these strategies are organized under separate headings, in reality students often used several of these strategies simultaneously. For example, during rapid writing, they often visualized, asked themselves questions and used prior experience. All of these strategies allowed students to generate ideas in what Gee (1989) calls their "mastered language" before they turned their attention to "correct" written expression.

I began to visualize

Elizabeth and Maria both used visualization to find writing ideas. When her English 13 teacher gave the topic of "memories," Maria initially thought her mind was "blank." Later, however, she "began to visualize the places where I had been when I was a little girl and the things that I used to do." When writing in English Strategies about a train, Elizabeth "visualize[d] the sound of a passing train as well as the sound while sitting inside of a train [and] the sensations picked up from . . . a moving train."

I started questioning myself.

Maria and Elizabeth also used self-questioning to generate writing ideas. When writing in English Strategies about the phrase "you must risk getting lost," Elizabeth asked herself why she would risk becoming lost, quickly coming up with eight reasons. In a personal anecdote for her English class, Maria asked herself why she hated vegetables as a child "and wrote half a page. The words just came one after the other."

I am . . . trying to predict

Maria and Elizabeth began to generate ideas for writing assignments based on preliminary teacher discussion about the assignments, sometimes even before their teachers had given assignment topics. "I thought about what things would be asked if I was to write an essay," said Elizabeth. "I therefore reflect[ed] on the conflict . . . the theme and tone . . . the characters [and] the plot."

I allowed myself to step into my past

Elizabeth and Maria wrote extensively in their journals about using prior knowledge and experience to generate ideas. When rapid writing in English Strategies about the phrase "standing in a doorway," Elizabeth thought about her experiences with doorways at home and at school to generate both "positive and negative feelings." She also used her prior knowledge of literature to help her write about the phrase, pretending it was taken from a novel or poem and then writing as though she were the original author. When writing about literature in her English class, Elizabeth frequently

linked the protagonist's experiences with her own in order to generate ideas about the protagonist's motivation and emotional responses.

Maria made many discoveries about using personal experience as a springboard for writing. If the topic was benign, Maria willingly recalled her past and used what she remembered to detail her writing. However, she also realized that she did not "feel very good when I have to remember certain passages of my life. I feel that I have nothing nice to say about my childhood." Her tendency when asked to recall some previous experiences was to "close myself in a cocoon very tight because it feels safe. Yet I want to be free as a bird, flap my dusty wings in the air . . . dress myself with new colourful, shiny feathers and explore my world to the fullest . . . know me, accept me, just the way I am!"

The realization that writing about painful previous experiences could be cathartic likely contributed to Maria's choice of topics for a major narrative assignment. She decided to write a story about "the saddest thing that ever happened to me" and, for several weeks in her journal, chronicled her response to using prior experience when writing. When she first started to write about her saddest experience, she reported that her face felt hot and her eyes filled with tears, "but I couldn't let [this] happen. I soaked them dry as if a sponge was inside my eyes so the juices of my sorrow stayed inside." She debated abandoning the topic, saying "sometimes it is not too good to dig graveyards and disturb the dead" but later remembered that "people say it's good to talk about things that are sad to remember." Sometimes, when she felt that she was "risking too much" by "revealing some of my life on paper," the writing did not occur easily. She wondered what effect telling this story would have on her. "I don't like the content but that's the only way I can try to forgive. I put myself in the quick sands because I have still the strength to come out alive again." Eventually, she finished the story and handed it in, her story "free, out of my soul. . .[now I can] really start living and inhaling fresh air."

Rapid writing . . . is my cup of tea

Five of the six students discussed using rapid writing (Klauser, 1987) or freewriting (Elbow, 1973) to help them generate ideas for a writing assignment. This technique was unfamiliar to all the students until it was

taught and practised in English Strategies. It involves writing non-stop about a topic for a given time, not pausing to edit for appropriateness or mechanical correctness. Maria felt that when she was rapid writing, she was "in a pull of words . . . I play and have fun." One day, Maria came to English Strategies class discouraged about an English class writing assignment. After she had participated in a rapid writing activity in English Strategies, "let[ting] my inner child write, . . . I felt again in control [of the English assignment]." Trevor noted that rapid writing allowed him to write in-class essays more quickly and Barb felt that this process helped her not to procrastinate with a take-home writing assignment. Before she knew about rapid writing, "I would have agonized over how to go about [the essay], without looking like an idiot." Elizabeth found that rapid writing brought memories and emotions to the page. She also noticed that she wrote very quickly and "at times, I felt like slowing down or rewriting . . . ideas that readily came to mind." She found it difficult to "ignore the left side of my brain which was very critical . . . since my handwriting . . . looked like crap." However, as she became more accustomed to ignoring her critic, Elizabeth began personal rapid writing at home, keeping paper in the bathroom and bedroom "since sometimes for me in total quietness or when relaxing, ideas just come out of nowhere like a forceful river." By the end of the course, four students reported that they were using rapid writing consistently whenever they wrote. "I fired the editor and now I just write, fixing it later," said Trevor.

Alice was the only student who did not find rapid writing beneficial. "I think it difficult to sit down and all at once have these amazing ideas. Brainstorming has never been a strong point for me. The ideas come as I write." Throughout the term, Alice continued to "let everything flow, but at the same time, critique what I've written." Since Alice's English 30 essays consistently earned marks of 90% - 100%, she was obviously using other strategies for idea generation that suited her thinking and writing style.

Organizing ideas

After students have generated enough details to begin a piece of writing, they often struggle with organizing them. They may not understand how to group ideas into paragraphs or how to arrange details within a paragraph coherently. To reassure students that they were already using categorization

in other areas of their lives, we discussed how they organized their dresser drawers, linen closets and CD collections, and why they used these systems. This initial discussion helped students to understand that grouping similar information into paragraphs would help them to organize their writing, just as grouping items such as clothing and CDs assisted them in being more organized at home.

I put my ideas in categories

Elizabeth reported that she wrote a thesis statement after reading a selection or viewing a film. Then, after generating ideas around this theme, she formed paragraph headings and grouped "ideas and examples. . .that supported these headings. . .so as to get my information flowing clearly and understandably."

The graphic organizer [is] . . . helpful

I distributed a number of graphic organizers in class. These visual plans give students a one-page, structured representation of everything they want to say and are usually divided into sections to promote organization of information into paragraphs.

One type of organizer was a circle divided into three wedges, each wedge representing an essay paragraph. Alice said using this organizer helped her to "group all my ideas in point form for each paragraph. I take so much time the other way where my notes are scattered all over as I think of them." Elizabeth used a graphic organizer split into four rectangles with the words "Main idea" as a heading and "Details" as a subheading in each box. "This type of . . . chart enabled me to visually separate my ideas and details, without starting a new idea." Before using a graphic organizer, Elizabeth reported, "I would just write and write without realizing that my ideas are jumbled up with details which could be used [in] another paragraph."

I like to use the T.E.D. E.D. and E.D. strategy

I generated the T.E.D., E.D. and E.D. acronym to help students remember what they needed to include in every paragraph of a literary essay. Many

students were not using enough examples to support their paragraph topics or were simply listing examples without discussing them. I showed students a sample literary essay and how the writer had included a topic sentence (T), three examples (E,E,E) and discussion (D,D,D) of each example in every paragraph. I hoped that T.E.D., E.D. and E.D. would give students an easily recalled pattern to follow when organizing their paragraph details. Also, they could use it to self-check their essays to be certain they had included enough examples and discussion.

Four students reported using the T.E.D., E.D. and E.D. strategy. Early in the term, Stewart found this method "didn't work as well as I hoped" but later he reported that it "helped get me started in my body paragraphs and keep them organized." Trevor said T.E.D., E.D. and E.D., together with other pointers about paragraph organization, "helped in trying to get a better structured paragraph [which] should be more understandable to the reader."

Writing drafts

As well as generating and organizing their ideas, it is important for students to develop personal strategies for writing various drafts of their assignments. Students sometimes assume that there is one "right" way to do this instead of a variety. We discussed the use of non-linear order in writing drafts, using a word processor and asking for feedback.

Floated from one [paragraph] to the other

I reinforced in class that writing a draft of an assignment may not necessarily proceed in linear order. Elbow (1973) advises that "if you think there are four sections in what you have to write, the worst thing you can do is write them separately . . . finish[ing] one before going on to the next . . . . Make yourself sketch in all four parts quickly and lightly; then work some more on each part, letting [the writing] go where it needs to . . . " (p. 73). I suggested to students that when working on essay drafts or when writing an in-class essay, they use one piece of paper for each paragraph, which would allow them the space to add details as they thought of them.

Stewart developed a strategy for essay writing very similar to the one suggested by Elbow (1973). Previous to taking English Strategies, Stewart assumed he had to work on one paragraph at a time and complete it before moving on. During the course, he began to write all of his essay paragraphs in order and then add details to each, "working on ideas that are coming to me quickly." This strategy helped Stewart to capture his ideas before he forgot them.

In an English 20 essay, Elizabeth also discovered that it is acceptable and possibly advisable not to write in linear order. She reported that she wrote all her body paragraphs and the conclusion of an essay first, then returned to write the introduction "since I kind of gather better ideas [for the introduction] … at the end of my essay."

I decided to use my computer

Word processing an essay is another method that can help students to "take control of their own writing" (Green, p. 5), from composing to revising and editing. For middle class, mainstream students, word processing is often a natural choice since computers and computer training are readily accessible. However, upgrading students may not automatically think to word process their essays since they often are not able to afford a home computer or the training to use it. The college at which I teach offers computer access and word processing courses to all students. Although I did not directly teach word processing skills, I reinforced the importance of composing at the computer, using the cut-and-paste function to move information quickly and easily, and using spellcheck and grammar check before having an essay evaluated.

Two students mentioned using a word processor to write their essays. Maria felt "very welcome and at ease" while writing on a computer. However, Stewart said that his decision to use a word processor without sufficient knowledge of its functions was actually a detriment to his writing. "By the way, my paragraph [for English Strategies] will be late due to computer problems," he quipped.

I sought help

Many adult students have had negative experiences with writing that have undermined their confidence (Kazemek, 1984) and may impede their comfort with asking questions. I encouraged students to ask for feedback on their writing, telling them that most writers want and need input on what they have written. As feedback is received, students may incorporate suggested strategies into their repertoire. Encouraging students to develop personal strategies for writing is an important step in helping them to become independent writers.

Most of the students reported in their journals that they had asked for assistance with their writing from the college's professional staff. Stewart and Alice reviewed essays with a college-funded tutor; Alice also frequented the college's extra help centre. Trevor's strategy was to take "tons of English," auditing two extra English classes to learn more about writing.

However, an underlying theme in three of the students' journals was an over-reliance on writing assistance. Early in the term, Alice mentioned she was always "bothering" the extra help centre personnel. "I know I lack confidence," she said. Later in the term, she began to rely more on herself and on using teacher feedback on her marked essays to improve her next written attempt, rather than continually asking for help. Early in the term, Stewart mentioned in his journal that he wanted to remember to proofread his essays more consistently before handing them in. However, he felt he could not rely on himself, saying "I am going to ask you to ask me if I proofread my essay and with having to answer with a 'yes', I will have to do this." I responded to this request by telling Stewart that I wanted him to assume responsibility for the proofreading and, good-humouredly if somewhat grudgingly, he agreed.

In the first weeks of the term, Maria frequently asked me for help with writing her journal entries. Her first journal mark of 3/5 distressed her and, even though her subsequent journal marks were always 5/5, she wanted me to provide an "example of how to do a journal." I resisted this request since I wanted her to continue developing the strong voice I heard in her entries. Although I provided written encouragement and feedback for her

journal writing, Maria told me that she also needed verbal "reinforcement" from me. Later in the term, Maria realized that her biggest challenge was "recognizing what is good in my writing." After this revelation, Maria began to make comments in her journal that showed the first stirrings of self-reliance. Although she wished for "many Canadian speaking friends [who could] help edit my writings," she realized that even without this help, she would "survive as usual." While doing a research project, she noted that she "tried to seek assistance, but I just had to rely on what I had found." When she did ask for help at the end of the term, it was more likely to be about a specific concern, such as whether certain words were appropriate for a written piece. In her final journal entry, Maria said that she sought help only "when I'm really stranded."

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The students who participated in this study made regular and effective use of writing strategies I taught in class. Students realized that generating ideas by visualizing, self-questioning, predicting, using prior experience and rapid writing is an important first step in writing that allows their "creator minds" to find many details that might otherwise lie dormant. When they turned their attention to crafting their information, they used the concept of grouping similar details, possibly with the help of a graphic organizer, to organize their paragraphs. Through using T.E.D., E.D. and E.D., they discovered a strategy for including a topic sentence, examples and discussion in each paragraph of an essay. They also experimented with strategies for writing their drafts in non-linear order, using word processors to help them write and asking for assistance during the writing process.

Not only did students use their journals to report using the strategies, they also shared the metacognitive processes they employed to evaluate their strategy use. Maria's "journal journey" through writing a painful story helped her to think about the value of using writing as catharsis. Several students reflected on why they over-relied on help for their essays early in the term, and reported on gradually coming to more self-reliance later in the term. Thinking metacognitively about instructor-taught strategies

helped students to personalize the strategies and make important discoveries about how and why these strategies did or did not work for them.

There are likely a number of reasons for the students' effective use of cognitive strategies and metacognitive processes. First of all, I modelled the strategies for students and shared my metacognitive processes while doing so. Therefore they were able to access not only an actual strategy, but were able to see it in use and "overhear" how I was monitoring its effectiveness. Modelling also reminded me of the many processes involved in every step of a writing assignment. For example, in the past, I have sometimes assumed that telling students to include more examples in their essays is sufficient feedback to help them improve in this regard. However, students may not know what an example is, how many "more" is, what the "best" examples are, how to incorporate an example into existing text and which punctuation conventions accompany giving an example. Through modelling, I became aware that I need to provide direct instruction in each of these areas, breaking down the information into easily learned chunks.

Also, students likely used and reflected on the strategies taught in class more effectively because they were asked to keep journals each week. Journals gave them a place to reflect on what strategies they had attempted and how well these methods were working. Journals also allowed me to monitor and provide feedback on student strategy use. Thus, the students and I worked as a team to ensure that their writing challenges were addressed quickly and effectively.

Since my results show that students used many of the strategies I taught to successfully complete their writing assignments, I will incorporate the teaching of these strategies into future courses and use many of the same instructional methods to teach them. I will also continue to read books about writing in order to discover new strategies. However, I also want to share the responsibility for discovering new strategies more equally with my students. The participants in this study revealed that adult upgrading students can overrely on their instructors for help with their writing, rather than finding and relying on their own resources. In the future, I plan to provide students with opportunities to research, use, and share with their

classmates strategies other than the ones I teach. In this way, students can begin to rely on themselves as the source of new strategies and move toward independent strategy use and evaluation.

Conclusion

Taking the time to teach, model and practise writing strategies with adult upgrading students has many positive outcomes. In his final journal entry, Trevor thought back to his writing previous to taking the English Strategies course. "I had lots of ideas to express verbally but couldn't get them on paper . . . . No one knew what I was saying; they were lost." By the end of the term, he reported that his writing assignment marks had improved, particularly in the area of sentence structure. "The nightmares of my convulted sentences will haunt you no more!" he joked, referring to my frustration when I read his writing early in the course. Maria was thrilled to have learned to "appreciate, accept and most of all give credit to my right brain. I am now using my creativity and my previous knowledge without fear." Stewart and Elizabeth were pleased to have discovered their "own pattern[s] for practising strategies that work best for me." Perhaps most importantly, all the students mentioned that, as a result of taking the course, they believed in themselves as learners. Elizabeth summed up the benefits of strategy use by saying, "I come away [from the course] feeling more positive and self confident, believing . . . that I will survive."

The participants in this study showed me that adult upgrading students can benefit extensively from increased awareness and application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in approaching not only their writing but all their academic tasks. The sense of control they gain can help them to believe in their ability to access and process information in many areas of their lives, a prospect that is too exciting, and too important, to ignore.

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Appendix 1

Annotated bibliography of books that include writing strategies

Elbow, P. (1973). *Writing without teachers*. London: Oxford University Press.

As its name suggests, this is a book for people who want a self-directed writing program. However, its strategies are well-suited to an adult basic education classroom. Elbow was one of the first proponents of free writing and describes its process and impact in detail.

Goldberg, N. (1986). *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within*. New York: Random House.

Goldberg, N. (1990). *Wild mind: Living the writer's life*. New York: Bantam Books.

Goldberg, N. (2000). *Thunder and lightning: Cracking open the writer's craft*. New York: Bantam Books.

These three books follow Goldberg's discoveries about writing and the writer's life. Lots of gems about writing in these, as well as interesting activities for students and instructors.

King, S. (2000). *On writing*. New York: Scribner.

This critically acclaimed book by the master of horror himself is part autobiography, part writing instruction book. Students who know his work would be particularly fascinated.

Klauser, H. A. (1987). *Writing on both sides of the brain: Breakthrough techniques for people who write*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

Klauser provides an understanding of how both creator and critic contribute to the writing process. Some interesting techniques for writers who struggle with either aspect of writing.

Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York: Pantheon Books.

I can't describe it better than the Los Angeles times does on the back of the book: "A warm, generous and hilarious guide through the writer's world and its treacherous swamps." Lots of short, snappy chapters, with down-to-earth titles such as "Shitty First Drafts."

Rico, G. L. (1983). *Writing the natural way: Using the right brain techniques to release your expressive powers*. Los Angeles, CA: J. P. Tarcher.

Rico discusses how to tap into the talents of what she calls our "design minds." The most academically written of this list, the book also provides some writing activities.

Appendix 2

Writing a Reflective Journal
(Guidelines given to students in English Strategies class)

Most Fridays, you will be writing a reflective journal and handing in what you have written for a possible 5 marks. These journals are worth 15% of your English Strategies final mark.

There are several purposes for writing these journals:

1) Some students are not as comfortable with face-to-face communication as others. I may not hear what you have to say unless you write down what you are thinking.

2) I need to know what is happening in your English class so that I can match the strategies I am teaching to your current needs.

3) I need to know if you are experiencing any problems with your various English assignments so that I can suggest possible strategies for dealing with them.

4) The journal is a place for you to "think about your thinking." In other words, I would like you to begin analyzing what strategies you are using to approach a task and whether or not these strategies are working.

5) Some students who have taken the Strategies course report that keeping a journal has improved their ability to express their thoughts in writing and to deal with problems they are having in their English classes.

At the start of the class on Fridays, I will give 15-20 minutes for you to write in your journal before I begin that day's lesson. If this is not enough time for you to write, consider doing your journal on Thursday afternoon or evening. Please keep all your entries in a scribbler or a duotang, rather than on separate sheets of paper. This will help us both to look back on what you have written and see your progress.

I will use the attached sheet when I mark your journals. Use it as a guide for what to say and how much to say in each entry. If you are absent on a Friday, you are responsible for giving me the journal on Monday.

Appendix 3

Mark Sheet for Reflective Journals
(English Strategies Class)

5 English class tasks reported. Thoughtful reflection about these tasks is included.
Strategies class tasks reported. Thoughtful reflection about these tasks is included.
Writer discusses one or more of the following in detail:
- how he or she is applying strategies taught in class to the tasks
- how he or she is applying own strategies to the tasks
- how he or she is applying strategies to other tasks besides those in English class

4 English class tasks reported. Thoughtful reflection about these tasks is included.
Strategies class tasks reported. Thoughtful reflection about these tasks is included.
Writer mentions application of strategies as above but not in as much detail.

3 English class tasks reported. Some attempt at reflection.
Strategies class tasks reported. Some attempt at reflection.
Little or no discussion of applying strategies to tasks.

2 Only a few sentences written. Inadequate thought and detail about tasks or application of strategies.

1 Only two or three sentences written. Almost no thought or detail.

0 Journal is not handed in.

Appendix 4

Outline of additional researched data on student strategy use and its outcomes

Reading Comprehension Strategies

1. Pre-reading strategies
   a. Characteristics of literary genre
   b. Author characteristics
   c. Skimming selection
   d. Establishing reading purpose
   e. Title preview

2. Reading process strategies
   a. Questioning, predicting, confirming
   b. Reading aloud
   c. Reviewing class notes
   d. Using prior knowledge and experience
   e. Taking notes
   f. Word skill strategies – dictionary; context; word structure; putting into own words
   g. Collaboration with peers
   h. Visualizing
   i. Emotional connections
   j. Interval reading
   k. Re-reading

3. Outcomes
   a. Increased independent reading
   b. Self-confidence
   c. Enjoyment of reading
   d. Less frustration
   e. Active reading made into a children's game
   f. Attention to subtleties and detail

Test-Taking Strategies

Multiple Choice Reading

1. Preview strategies
    a. Read questions first
    b. Skim selections
    c. Look for previous knowledge of selections/authors
    d. Figure out time per question

2. Reading process strategies
    a. Using prior knowledge and experience
    b. Read/answer/read/answer
    c. LSS accommodations – extra time/isolation

3. Choosing an answer
    a. Answer all questions
    b. Answer easiest first
    c. Note wording of questions
    d. Match answer with question
    e. Eliminate what it's definitely not
    f. Review all answers
    g. Second-guessing

4. Outcome – increased marks

Oral Presentation Strategies

1. Organization
2. Practise
3. Visualization
4. Tone of voice
5. Audience involvement
6. Reflection

Study Strategies

1. Relating new information to previous knowledge/experience
2. Imitating test tasks at home
3. Predicting exam questions
4. Memorizing – frequent review; mnemonics; visualizing; read, write, recite; notetaking
5. Homework – easy/hard questions first; breaking down questions

Stress Management

1. Breath management
2. Time management
3. Self talk
4. "Hang in there"
5. Taking a break
6. "Zoning out"
7. "Getting back on the horse that threw you"
8. Venting
9. Go with the flow

Strategy Use—General Effects

1. Having a procedure for approaching a task
2. Ability to ask for help
3. Reassurance of existing strategy use
4. Increased willingness to learn
5. Improved writing skills
6. "Many minds, many ways"
7. Ability to understand literature
8. Vocabulary improvement
9. Appreciating right brain functions
10. Understanding others
11. Lowered stress
12. Increased self-confidence
13. Looking forward to the future