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ATTITUDE AS IT AFFECTS DEVELOPMENTAL WRITERS' ESSAYS

The Writing Center at the University of Florida recently conducted a study to explore whether developmental students' attitudes toward writing relate to their actual writing performance—at once reflecting and affecting their growth as writers. The study represented our second effort¹ to address the significance of attitude as a potential means of answering some puzzling questions. Why, for example, do large discrepancies occur in the rate of improvement among developmental students whose placement essays suggest comparable ability and who are enrolled in the same writing courses? What factors explain the substantial progress which some students seem to make in their writing, while other students appear to decline?

Certainly, such variations in writing growth can be partially attributed to individual developmental factors. Mina Shaughnessy noted, for example, the "private timetable" (276) of the remedial learner, as well as the diversities of skills of developmental writers and the myriad factors influencing their errors. Similarly, Andrea Lunsford has called attention to the difficulties many basic writers experience in synthesizing or analyzing (41). In addition, Elifson and Stone have drawn parallels between the stages of growth apparent in basic writing and what they describe as James Fowler's delineation of the developing stages in the individual.

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At the same time, attitude can also be important in affecting the motivation and performance of students. As J.D. Williams and Scott Alden found, extrinsically motivated students are less eager to improve their writing than are intrinsically motivated peers who see writing as important. According to Shaughnessy, the problem is especially serious for developmental writers. She notes, "By the time he reaches college, the BW both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. . . . Writing puts him on the line and he doesn't want to be there" (7).

The effects of apprehension as one part of the general attitude construct have been extensively documented by John Daly and his colleagues. While acknowledging the lack of a close relationship between writing aptitude and writing attitude, Daly found that apprehensive writers score lower on objective tests than do less anxious students. Furthermore, as Daly and Shamo discovered, students' apprehensiveness affects their choice of courses, and according to Daly and Miller, it also influences their choice of occupations. In addition, Faigley, Daly, and Witte found that very apprehensive writers tend to produce shorter, simpler papers than do their more confident peers. This element of student confidence also appears as a factor in the recent work of McCarthy, Meier, and Rederer, who indicate that students' evaluation of the effectiveness of their writing skills is related to the quality of their writing performance. Overall, these studies strongly suggest that students' attitudes toward writing may affect their writing performance.

To conduct our own exploration of what influence attitude might have on writing, we administered a writing attitude questionnaire to 100 developmental writing students (38 male and 62 female) in 1985 at the start of their college career. These students, 92% of whom were Black, had all been specially admitted to the University of Florida with SAT scores below 840. The students wrote a 50-minute expository essay about a person outside their families who had influenced them. An independent team of English instructors trained in holistic assessment scored the essays; the essay scores, together with a Test of Standard Written English score of 37 or below, were used to place the students in a structured writing program. The program included two semesters of intensive work on writing and grammar skills in Writing Center classes and one semester of freshman composition. The curriculum of both courses required students to write several papers.

We gave the attitude questionnaire, a copy of which appears in Appendix A to the essay, during the first week of classes. The questionnaire consists of three broad categories that address students' apprehension about writing, their perceptions of its usefulness, and their understanding of the writing process as it applied to their own practices. Similar to the Daly-Miller instrument, the apprehension subset of the questionnaire (items 8, 11, 12, 15, 19, 20, and 24) explores students' reactions toward completing writing assignments, having their work read by peers, and being graded by a teacher. Because we wanted to broaden our instrument to cover more than students' fears about writing, we included several items that required students to evaluate the importance of writing

both in their previous school experiences and in their anticipated majors and careers. These applicability items (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18) resemble those found in the "Writing Attitude Scale" by Thomas Reigstaad and Donald McAndrew (38). Still other items (numbers 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30) assess students' understanding and use of prewriting and revising techniques. We felt that students' perceptions of the writing process itself might comprise an integral part of their general attitude toward writing, with those who viewed their writing problems as chiefly grammatical possibly having different attitudes toward writing from those students who recognized more fully the complexities of the composing process. A worksheet for tallying the subset scores is included in Appendix C. To confirm the reliability of the instrument, we administered the questionnaire a week later to half the group selected at random, and we obtained a satisfactory rating of .79 with the Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

On the basis of the ratings students assigned each item of the questionnaire, we classified their overall attitudes toward writing as "high," "medium," or "low"; in addition, we analyzed the scores in terms of the three subsets of process, usefulness, and apprehension. To explore attitudes in relation to writing growth, we evaluated at the end of the second term, students' pre-post performance on two measures: multiple-choice tests of editing skills and timed expository essays. The editing tests, which were matched versions developed in the Writing Center at the University of Florida, consist of 60 items that require students to identify errors of sentence structure, usage, and mechanics. The final essay topic, like the first, required students to draw upon personal experience for their 50 minutes of writing; whereas the pre-topic asked students to discuss an important outside figure in their lives, the post-topic focused on an important decision students had made. The post-essays were intermingled with the first essays for a holistic scoring by a team of independent readers from the English Department. The students gained an average of 6.39 points out of a possible 60 on the editing test, results which proved statistically significant. Their essays also averaged a statistically significant gain of .86 points on a scale from 2 to 8 points.

Only some of the students' attitudes toward writing appeared related to their performance. Not surprisingly in view of the weak connections often cited between writing improvement and grammar study, few links appeared in our study between students' attitudes and their improvement on the editing test: students with "high," "medium," and "low" writing attitudes did not differ significantly in their gains on the editing test. Although students with positive attitudes had performed the best on the initial editing test, their improvement on the final editing test was not substantially better than that made by students with more neutral or negative attitudes. Only in the subset of usefulness did a distinction appear: students who viewed writing as moderately useful improved more on the editing test than did those who perceived writing as unimportant. But with that one exception, students' writing attitudes had little bearing on grammar gain. Because the questionnaire attempted to

measure attitude toward writing rather than toward language alone, we felt that this finding validated our use of the questionnaire as a measure of the construct of “writing attitude.” More significantly, it made us reflect again on what the best means might be to address basic writers’ apparent need for grammar work, in view of the questionable value grammar study has on either students’ attitudes toward writing or their actual writing performance.

Unlike the tenuous link between writing attitude and grammar gain, a more positive relationship appeared between writing attitude and essay gain. Analysis of covariance revealed that the students who comprised the “high,” “medium,” and “low” categories of writing attitudes also differed significantly on their post-essays when we controlled for their scores on the pre-essays. Thus, students with very positive writing attitudes received significantly higher post-test essay scores than did those with low writing attitude scores. Interestingly, as Table 1 in Appendix B to this essay shows, those students with medium attitude ratings did not differ in a statistically significant way from those students at either end of the scale. To explain this finding we can only speculate that these students who demonstrated an essentially neutral attitude toward writing appeared to be neither hindered nor helped by their views.

Similar distinctions appeared among students’ scores in the process and apprehension subsets: As indicated in Table 2 in Appendix B, students with a strong knowledge of the writing process scored significantly higher on the post-essays than did those whose awareness of process fell in the *middle* range. We were not surprised by this result in that students familiar with the prewriting and revising strategies might be expected to perform better on their essays. However, we were puzzled to discover that students with the weakest knowledge of the writing process did not differ to a statistically significant extent in their essay gain from those students at either the middle or the high end of the spectrum. If our sample had been larger, a difference might have appeared. These results suggest that having a good understanding of process is associated with a gain in writing ability, whereas having a lesser understanding, either fair or poor, does not help.

Similar findings occurred with the apprehension subset: As shown in Table 3 in Appendix B, students with low apprehension scores and therefore more confidence in writing scored higher on their post-essays than did those with medium apprehension ratings. The post-essay scores for very apprehensive writers were lower than for the others, although not significantly so; again, however, a larger sample might have made a difference. These results confirm the findings of Daly, Miller, and others concerning the negative effects of apprehension on writers. For us, these results reinforce the need for basic writing teachers to recognize the impact apprehension may have on students in basic writing classes.

The usefulness subset was the only attitude designation apparently having no bearing on essay results: As shown in Table 4 in Appendix B, no significant difference in post-essay scores appeared among the three groups scoring “high,” “medium,” and “low” on the usefulness subset

when we controlled for the pre-test essay scores. Despite what we intuitively feel should be the case, students' perceptions about the importance of writing in their past, present, or future lives seem unrelated to the students' actual writing improvement.

With the exception of the usefulness subset, we can conclude that for the students of our study, overall writing attitude, as well as apprehension of writing and comprehension of the process involved, seems related to the gain they made in their writing skills. Students with positive attitudes toward writing gained significantly more than did those with either neutral or negative attitudes. That writing improvement seems linked to positive writing attitudes does not, however, imply a causal relationship between the two. Rather, we speculate that the connection may be circular. That is, those students who view writing positively may work harder and perform better than their peers in their actual writing assignments, thereby having their positive feelings reinforced. Those students with neutral or negative feelings about writing, on the other hand, either may be apprehensive about putting forth as much effort or may be discouraged by poor results from trying harder. Thus, our work suggests that attitude, like the individual developmental factors, may partially account for some of the disparate gains in basic writing classes.

We feel, however, that the role attitude may play in writing should not be overstated, as our sample was small and our instrument limited to addressing a few components of the attitude construct. Our study did not control for such variables as individual teaching quality or reader reliability in the holistic scoring process. Moreover, because our study was confined to one group of students during a span of two semesters, we need to conduct more research before we can generalize our findings to other basic writers. Nevertheless, the results make us consider the possible teaching implications for students who have negative attitudes toward writing combined with weak composing performance.

The need for modifying such negative attitudes is critical. As John Daly observes, "A positive attitude about writing is associated with, and may even be a critical precursor of, the successful development and maintenance of writing skills" ("Writing Apprehension" 44). As basic writing instructors, we can undertake this task by continuing to familiarize our students with the writing process, by helping them deal with their writing apprehension, and by making them more cognizant of the importance of writing.

As indicated by the responses to the questionnaire, many entering students either do not know or do not practice a process approach to writing. Therefore, clarifying the writing process for them seems an essential first step in modifying their attitudes toward writing. We instructors must continue to help our students to develop strategies for prewriting and revising, to practice collaborative learning through the peer review of papers, and, most importantly, to focus not on the written product alone but on the larger writing process. Though certainly not new, all

these practices are important if students are to have a manageable idea of how to proceed with writing assignments.

In addition to demystifying the writing process, we teachers must also deal with students' apprehension by attempting to find where, why, and how their particular stumbling blocks occur (Selfe 93). As Mina Shaughnessy discussed, and as the protocol analyses of Muriel Harris have recently confirmed, the individual causes of writing problems vary widely, from excessive rereading or premature editing to a debilitating preoccupation with what a teacher will deem "correct" (Harris 171-174). Therefore, we must continue to observe and confer with students as they write in class to determine the particular sources of their writing difficulty. At the same time, as McCutcheon, Hull, and Smith suggest in their work on the editing practices of basic writers, we teachers must identify which strategies, intuitive or learned, our students are already using effectively. Then we can either build on their existing strengths or we can, as Harris suggests, use modeling techniques, films, or videotapes to demonstrate strategies that will help them overcome their problems.

Finally, as teachers we can work toward increasing students' realization of the usefulness of writing both in their college careers and in the workplace. This study did not reveal much connection between students' writing improvement and their perceptions about the usefulness of writing. Nevertheless, as Paul V. Anderson points out, unless students grasp the importance that writing plays for most college-educated employees, students may be unwilling to put forth the necessary effort to improve their writing skills (75). Thus, in our teaching, we can inform students of the findings of Robert Bataille and of Pearl Aldrich, who surveyed managers in different fields to determine both the extent of writing and the writing traits valued most highly in real-world situations. Aldrich found, for example, that many managers did not know how to plan and organize their writing, nor did they consider issues of audience and purpose (286). Bataille also stressed the importance of audience, as well as "qualities like persuasiveness, clarity, and conciseness" (280). To augment these findings, we can ask students to discuss together the types of writing encountered in various fields, or we can assign them the task of finding out the nature of writing that their majors will require. Lastly, we can design some of our expository assignments around such work requirements as memos, reports, or letters (Anderson 73).

Through this combination of approaches, all of us involved with basic writers can work to improve students' attitudes toward writing. As Ernest Boyer notes in comments which echo the "exact man" of Francis Bacon, "Clear writing leads to clear thinking; clear thinking is the basis of clear writing. Perhaps more than other forms of communication, writing holds us responsible for our words and ultimately makes us more thoughtful human beings" (21). Part of our task as instructors must be to help these students, who so often dread writing, make the same discovery.

APPENDIX A
 University of Florida
 Writing Center
 Writing Attitude Questionnaire

Name _____

Writing course _____
 you are now taking

Reading course _____
 you are now taking

Expected Major _____

The following questionnaire asks you about your attitude toward writing and about the process you use whenever you write. Please respond as honestly as you can by checking the category that best describes your reaction to each statement listed.

Note: Your answers will not affect any courses you are now taking.

5 4 3 2 1
 Strongly No Dis- Strongly
 Agree Agree Opinion agree Disagree

1. In the past, writing has not been a necessary skill for me to know.
2. Writing was never emphasized during my secondary school days.
3. Children should be required to write more in elementary school.
4. During high school I was required to write a report or a short paper almost every month.
5. My English classes in high school should have required me to do more writing.
6. Until now I have never written much for personal reasons.
7. College students should be required to take at least two writing courses.

	5	4	3	2	1
	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Dis- agree	Strongly Disagree
1. In the past, writing has not been a necessary skill for me to know.					
2. Writing was never emphasized during my secondary school days.					
3. Children should be required to write more in elementary school.					
4. During high school I was required to write a report or a short paper almost every month.					
5. My English classes in high school should have required me to do more writing.					
6. Until now I have never written much for personal reasons.					
7. College students should be required to take at least two writing courses.					

5 4 3 2 1
 Strongly No Dis- Strongly
 Agree Agree Opinion agree Disagree

19. In the future I plan to conduct my personal affairs by telephone rather than by writing.
20. I would never choose a major that requires much writing.
21. Putting my thoughts down on paper helps me to straighten out my thinking.
22. I have difficulty organizing my ideas.
23. I always jot down ideas before I begin my writing.
24. I rarely have anything significant to say.
25. I prepare an outline or similar sketch before I begin to write.
26. My frequent mistakes in grammar and punctuation hurt my writing.
27. I do not have to spend much time on my writing assignments.
28. I generally limit my revision of papers to the correction of spelling or punctuation errors.
29. Whenever I write, I am aware of the persons who will be reading my paper.
30. Each time that I write, I know clearly what I want to accomplish.

	5	4	3	2	1
19. In the future I plan to conduct my personal affairs by telephone rather than by writing.					
20. I would never choose a major that requires much writing.					
21. Putting my thoughts down on paper helps me to straighten out my thinking.					
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30. Each time that I write, I know clearly what I want to accomplish.					

APPENDIX B

Table 1

Overall Writing Attitude

	(Attitude Scores of 83 and above)	(Attitude Scores of 70 to 82)	(Attitude Scores of 69 and below)
Post-essay Adjusted Mean	High 5.81	Medium 5.35	Low 4.97

Table 2

Process Subset of Attitude Questionnaire

	(8 to 20)	(3 to 7)	(-12 to 2)
Post-essay Adjusted Means	High 5.85	Medium 5.12	Low 5.34

Table 3

Apprehension Subset

	(-15 and above)	(-20 to -16)	(-21 and below)
Post-essay Adjusted means	Low 5.78	Medium 5.17	Severe 5.21

Table 4

Usefulness Subset

	(20 and above)	(13 to 19)	(12 and below)
Post-essay Adjusted Mean	High 5.57	Medium 5.38	Low 5.10

APPENDIX C

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES

Name: _____ Attitude Total: _____

- I. Assign to each number below the corresponding numerical rating of the box the student has checked on the questionnaire (e.g., a 5 beside question 3 would mean the student has checked strongly agree).
- II. To determine the sub-totals, add the positive questions and subtract the total value of the negative questions in that subset. Category II is entirely negative.
- III. To determine the final attitude score, add the sub-totals to a base of 60.

<u>Usefulness of Writing</u>	<u>Positive Questions</u>	<u>Negative Questions</u>
Past	3) 4) 5)	1)
Present	7) 9) 13) 16) 17)	10)
Future	18)	
Personal Reasons	14)	6)
		Sub Total: _____

<u>Apprehensiveness about Writing</u>	8) 11) 12) 15) 19) 20) 24)
	Sub Total: _____

<u>Understanding of Process</u>		
Prewriting	21) 23) 25)	
Organization		22)
Grammar		26)
Writing/Revising		27) 28)
Audience/Purpose	29) 30)	
		Sub-Total: _____

Note


¹The first study, "The Effect of Developmental English Students' Perceptions about the Importance of Writing on Their Performance in Composition Classes," was presented at the Southeastern Writing Center Conference, Atlanta, in April 1985. It is available in ERIC, ED 260 446. The results of the first study were inconclusive. However, the first study differed in several respects from the one we discuss in this essay; not only was the first sample one-third smaller than the present sample, but also the course sequence prescribed for the students was changed by state mandate. Furthermore, the "Writing Attitude Questionnaire" is more comprehensive than an earlier draft we used for the first study.

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