Understanding "Writing Passivity" in Order to Optimise the Writing Performance of all Student Writers

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The primary objective of this research was to investigate the construct of writing passivity and the situation of passive writers, a group who disliked writing, held poor perceptions of themselves as writers, and used writing strategies that were neither effective nor efficient. The study involved the collection of quantitative and qualitative data from students in the middle years of schooling. A connection between writing passivity and underachievement as a writer was established, with findings suggesting that while passive writers performed more poorly as writers they were not less able than other student-writers. Thus, writing passivity was not related to deficit, but associated with pessimistic explanatory style, especially a tendency to regard bad events as permanent and pervasive. In addition, a perceived lack of control caused a sense of helplessness for passive writers. As such, writing passivity would seem amenable to intervention that is sensitive to students' explanatory style, and that develops a sense of control through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and strategic writing behaviours. Sensitivity to a student's affective disposition, and its intersection with the process of writing should provide a focus for teachers when they respond to students' writing products. Affect must be included in the complex of student behaviours that is scaffolded during instruction. Without its inclusion, a significant dimension of a student writer's metacognition is rendered invisible.

Understanding passivity

The notion of passivity was first proposed by Johnson and Winograd (1985), but in relation to reading. In making this proposal, they drew on literature concerning metacognition, achievement motivation, learned helplessness, and attribution theory. Johnston and Winograd suggested a connection between passivity and underachievement in reading. A construct of writing passivity seemed equally viable, where passive writers would describe negative affect in relation to: themselves as writers; the task itself; and, the strategies they used when writing. Thus, the research to be described in this paper was intended to provide understanding of how teachers might respond to passive writers.

Researchers of writing have tried to capture theory in terms of models as a means of contributing knowledge and advancing pedagogy, however, it is always difficult to capture and convey a totally comprehensive view of a complex and dynamic process such as writing in a static, two-dimensional model. Various models have been proposed in the last four decades, and while each model has adopted a particular focus, none has taken the role of affect as a primary focus.

The role of affect in models of writing

Until the 1960s, writing was regarded as a set of skills to be practised and perfected (Rivalland, 1991). However, during the 70s, Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen (1975) suggested a model of writing that emphasised function and audience. This was important as it emphasised the development of writing from expressive inner speech. Moffett's (1981) thinking was in line with that of Britton and his colleagues, with both of their models drawing heavily on the work of Vygotsky (1962) in relation to inner speech and its role in the interrelation of thought and language.

Writing continued to receive attention during the 80s. Graves' (1983) research caused teachers to focus on the process of writing rather than the products that resulted from that process. He emphasised the interrelationship of various forms of language use such as listening, talking, reading and writing, and suggested a spectrum of activities for their development. Graves stated clearly to teachers how they might be involved in their students' writing development. About the same time, Kress (1982) advocated a genre-based model to underpin the writing development of students, insisting that students develop mastery over a range of genres.

Also during the 1980s, cognitive theorists developed an interest in writing. In particular, two teams advanced understanding of writing as a psychological process. The first of these teams was Flower and Hayes (1981). Their model challenged the use of linear, stage models and captured the writing process as being recursive, interactive, goal directed, and hierarchically organised. The second team was that of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) who made the critical distinction between a knowledge-telling model and a knowledge-transforming model. They explained that when students conform to a knowledge-telling model, they "tell" what they know about a topic, whilst loosely observing the structural conventions of the required genre. In contrast, when students adhere to a knowledge-transforming model, they adopt a more sophisticated, problem-solving process.

Both models were criticised at the time by Brand (1987) who claimed that cognitive models failed to "capture the rich, psychological dynamics of humans in the very act of cognising" (p.440). Brand was alluding to the absence of affect. Cooper (1986) and Nystrand (1989) were also critical of cognitive models of writing, claiming that these models presented an image of the ideal writer as one detached from a wider, social context (Cooper, 1986; Nystrand, 1989). This line of thinking was further developed by Gee (1990) who emphasised that language and texts were forms of social practice, a view that currently dominates thinking about all literacy practices (Green & Campbell, 2003).

The role of affect in learning and performance

Whilst the centrality of affect might not have been explicated in models of writing, the role of affect in learning and performance received much attention. Affect was found to be enabling or debilitating. Csikszentmihalyi (1992) proposed the construct of flow that he described as a state of consciousness characterised by enjoyment, intrinsic motivation and controlled challenge. Flow theory had clear application in classrooms by providing a model that explained how too little challenge could lead to boredom and how too much challenge could lead to anxiety. Affect that disabled was explained through the work of

Seligman and his colleagues, initially through investigations of learned helplessness and later in a model of explanatory style (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993).

Seligman (1991) described explanatory style as "the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen" (p. 15), where one's explanatory style could be either optimistic or pessimistic. While optimists regard the causes of bad events as temporary, localised, and not personalised, pessimists see the causes of bad events as permanent, pervasive and personalised. Whereas optimistic explanatory style has been found to predict enhanced levels of well-being and increased levels of achievement (Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993), pessimistic explanatory style is a strong predictor of depression (Seligman, 1991). Explanatory style has been researched in an educational context with studies showing that it contributed to academic performance. For example, Yates, Yates and Lippett (1995) found that optimistic explanatory style associated with positive attitudes towards Mathematics, higher levels of achievement, and endorsement of task-oriented goals. These associations were not evident with pessimistic explanatory style.

Investigating the role of affect for passive writers

If passive writers describe negative affect in relation to: themselves as writers; the task itself; and, to the strategies they use when writing, it is important to determine if and how this negative affect is debilitating, and how writing passivity associates with the knowledge, skills and processes of writers. In order to provide instruction that is responsive to the needs of passive writers, it is important to establish how passive writers are different from other student writers. Do they perform differently? Do they explain their writing experiences differently? Do they perceive the writing context differently? Are they less able?

Method

Two phases of research were conducted with students. Prior to these, a scale was developed to identify students in the lower secondary school with atypical levels of negative affect, that is, passive writers. Negative affect was considered to be atypical when feelings towards components of task, self and strategic behaviour were biased by lesser levels of one or more of these components, compared with their equal distribution. Therefore, student-writers with atypical levels of negative affect were those who: disliked writing, and/or held a poor perception of themselves as writers, and/or described dysfunctional, writing behaviours.

The first phase involved the collection of qualitative data through a series of interviews with 37 students in the lower-secondary years of schooling. These data were analysed using a process of analytical induction, and were used to establish a profile of passive writers in terms of knowledge, attitude, beliefs, behaviour, performance and ability. In the second phase, quantitative data were obtained from a sample of more than 1000 students in the lower secondary school. Students completed a series of measures pertaining to: writing passivity, perceptions of classroom writing ecology, writing performance, explanatory style, and general intellectual ability. Data were analysed using analysis of variance, post hoc analyses and discriminant analysis. Findings were intended

to identify variables with the greatest discriminatory power for passive writers and other groups of student writers.

Findings

Findings provided description of passive writers that distinguished them from other student-writers. Passive writers reported a history of writing failure and offered defeatist explanations for their failure. They explained low perception of themselves as writers in terms of self-deficit:

> I just keep on getting frustrated with myself cause I try to do stuff but I just haven't got the brains, I suppose. (Yr 8 female)

Frustration found expression as helplessness. When describing her writing, one subject said, "I don't know. I just leave it. I stop" (Year 9 female). A second student commented, "I don't know. I just keep thinking. I worry a bit" (Year 9 male). When asked to describe herself as a writer, a third student replied, "Hopeless. I just don't understand words, like I don't understand what I want to do" (Year 8 female). Passive writers described writing as boring, and disliked writing because writing tasks usually resulted in low grades. The following example is illustrative:

> Student: It [writing] was boring.
> Interviewer: Were there any bad memories that stand out as horrible?
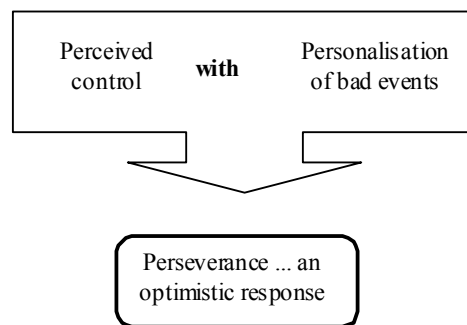> Student: The marks I got.

When discriminant analysis was used to determine differences between passive writers and other student-writers, four variables were considered. These were: (1) perception of writing ecology; (2) explanatory style; (3) writing performance; and (4) general intellectual ability. Two variables discriminated amongst groups at significance level (p = .01). One function accounted for 93.8% of variance, and was defined by variables of writing performance and explanatory style. Perceptions of writing ecology and general intellectual ability did not discriminate passive writers from other student-writers. This suggests that passive writers are not less able than other student-writers but perform less well as a result of pessimistic explanatory style.

Discussion

Passive writers were different from other student-writers for results on two particular dimensions of explanatory style: (1) permanence for bad events and (2) pervasiveness for bad events. Passive writers adopted a pessimistic explanatory style in that they were more inclined than other students to believe that causes of bad events would persist across time, and to other situations. Thus, they need to be shown how to dispute negative thinking by believing that marks can be improved over time, and across a series of tasks. This understanding can be provided directly, following a procedure outlined by Seligman (1995).
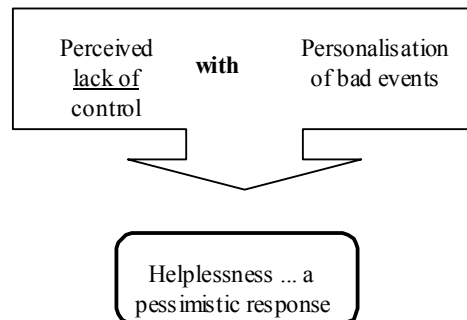
It is worth noting that while all students personalised bad events, passive writers' tendency to self-blame seemed to develop from different thinking and had different outcomes. As Sellars and Peterson (1993) indicated, bad events may not be seen as

uncontrollable. Figure 1 illustrates how perceived control in combination with the personalisation of bad events can be adaptive.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Perceived        with      Personalisation  │
│   control                     of bad events  │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌───────────────────┐
            │ Perseverance ... an │
            │ optimistic response │
            └───────────────────┘
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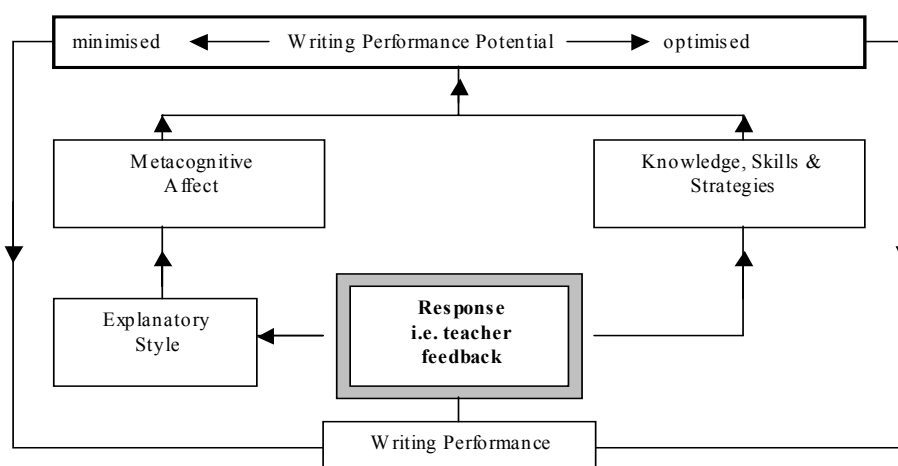
Figure 1.

The significance of perceived control.

However, when there is perceived lack of control in combination with the personalisation of bad events, the outcome can be maladaptive as illustrated in Figure 2.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Perceived        with      Personalisation  │
│   lack of                     of bad events  │
│   control                                    │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌───────────────────┐
            │  Helplessness ... a │
            │ pessimistic response│
            └───────────────────┘
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Figure 2.

The significance of perceived lack of control.

It is important for teachers to help all students in optimising their Writing Performance Potential. Figure 3 suggests how this can be done. It suggests how Response to student writing is central to this process. Feedback from teachers should not simply make students feel good about themselves. As Seligman (1995) noted, "feeling

good" needs to associate with "doing well". If it doesn't it can actually erode a student's sense of worth, and the teacher can lose credibility. As feedback is mediated by students' Explanatory Style to produce Metacognitive Affect, it should be sensitive to students' way of explaining their achievement as writers with the intention of nurturing an optimistic disposition. Feedback from teachers should affirm strengths, highlight persistent errors, and focus on a set of realistic yet challenging goals for the writer. These goals need to be framed in terms of Knowledge, Skills and Strategies for the writer, and need to be taught explicitly. For example, teachers need to model different strategies for procedures such as knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), and provide students with an understanding of when a particular procedure is appropriate. As indicated in Figure 3, the inter-relation of students' metacognitive affect with their knowledge, skills and strategies as writers positions them on a continuum for Writing Performance Potential. Placement is optimised when the valence of metacognitive affect is more positive, and when knowledge, skills and strategies are enhanced.

Figure 3.

Response to writing and its influence on potential for writing performance.

Passive writers need to develop an optimistic explanatory style if they are to break from a cycle of writing passivity. They also need to develop a sense of control that is underpinned by a knowledge of writers and writing, and a repertoire of skills and strategies associated with writing.

Conclusion

Renewed interest in the interaction of affect and cognition has lead to a paradigm shift in the last decade where support for such constructs as emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and learned optimism evidence that shift. This study provides further support for this shift, but in the context of writing.

Writing is a complex process. It demands a consciousness beyond that required for dealing with oral texts as it usually involves closed discourse that does not rely on social exchange (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). It requires a need to accommodate two different roles: as author where ideas are generated, organised, and expressed; and, as secretary where the mechanical and physical processes provide a focus. Movement between these roles can be challenging for some writers (Isaacson, 1989).

While the task of writing is a complex process, if a consideration of affect does not permeate that sense of complexity, our understanding of writing is incomplete. The construct of affect is an essential inclusion of a writer's metacognitive repertoire especially when negative affect can be so debilitating for writers. The situation of passive writers deserves special attention, especially as the condition of writing passivity has been described, and as a result of this description is clearly amenable to intervention by classroom teachers.

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