

## **‘Rapid writing ... is my cup of tea’: Adult High School Students’ Use of Writing Strategies**

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*The purpose of this research-in-practice study in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, was to determine what writing strategies adult high school students use and whether these strategies help them to succeed in their school-based writing assignments. Since student journals were used as a data source, the study features student descriptions of writing strategies and their effectiveness. The author shares how she reached the conclusion that adult high school students can benefit extensively from increased awareness and application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in approaching their writing.*

### **Introduction to the Study**

When adults enroll in high school English courses, they often struggle with assigned writing, even in congregated settings that support their efforts at upgrading their literacy skills. For any student, “self esteem will be deeply engaged when the topic of instruction is composition” (Trembley, 1993, p. 4). For adult high school students, whose “self-esteem is [often] neither very positive nor very solid” (Trembley, p. 4), writing of any sort is rarely their “cup of tea,” particularly when they recall previous unpleasant experiences with school-assigned writing. Perhaps as a result of their shaky self-esteem and negative memories, adult high school 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 a high school English 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. However, I have been concerned that students were not applying the strategies I was teaching to the writing assigned in their English classes. 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 High School Students**

Cognitive strategies help “process and transform information” and “assist the learner [to] actively engage in the knowledge acquisition process” (McCrindle &

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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 & Christensen, pp. 170-171). Although there is little research related specifically to adult high school 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 & Christensen, p. 170), such as increased academic success (Dwyer, Tomei, & Mohr, 2000) and lower student attrition (Doyle & 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). Since many adult high school students have low self-esteem when they return to school, they may tend not to use cognitive strategies or monitor the effectiveness of these strategies, even when their instructors introduce strategies in class. 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 high school 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 high school 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 adult high school students to 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 reread 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**

### ***Study Context***

I undertook this study in the large urban college where I teach. The college provides basic literacy, pre-high school, and high school courses as well as job skill training to a diverse population of adult students, whose personal contexts are often characterized by poverty, abuse, learning difficulties, health issues, and low self-esteem. Among other programs and courses, the college provides high school English classes that follow the

provincial curriculum, which focuses on the reading of and response to literature. The classes are taught by certified teachers.

The study was based in a course called English Strategies. Frequently, adult students return to school with negative perceptions of themselves as students and may cope with school by adopting passive, dependent behaviors, relying heavily on their teachers for reassurance and direction. Also, many of the students are unaware of cognitive strategies and metacognitive control of these strategies. Therefore, the college’s Learning Support Services department offers English Strategies to help students develop independent learning skills. Students are introduced to cognitive strategies for dealing with the assignments in their high school English classes. Students are also helped 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 psychoeducational 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 eight years, revising and refining its content and my teaching approach in response to student feedback, professional reading, and inservices. 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 them. 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.

Students are introduced to reflective journal writing during the first week of class. 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). Journal use, therefore, gives students an opportunity to develop metacognitive control of their cognitive strategies. In discussing the journals, I explain the term “metacognition” and distribute a written explanation of the reasons for and benefits of journal writing.

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 metacognitively. They may also write about strategies they tried in other subjects and in out-of-school tasks. I respond to the 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.

Although I initially introduced journals to promote student accountability in using the strategies and thinking metacognitively 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.<sup>1</sup>



### *The Study 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 and had completed different levels of public school education. All were within the first eighteen months of beginning their high school 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 metacognition as well as reports about strategy use. In my experience, adult high school students are often reluctant to participate in research, fearing the results may be “used against them” in some way. Therefore, not all students who had entries

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.

that showed cognitive and metacognitive thought volunteered to participate in the study and I examined six journals to obtain data. Becker (1986) recommends that the research goal should help to determine the number of study participants. Since I planned to conduct an in-depth study of the students' journals in order to determine their strategy use and its effectiveness, choosing six journals seemed appropriate to help accomplish the research goal.

The 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 and metacognition, the other four wrote less descriptive weekly summaries during class. 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 single 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 storable to be useful and may not be storable 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 high school 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 sub-headings.

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

Since I teach writing in English Strategies using a process approach, I identified three categories of student strategy use: generating ideas, organizing information, and writing drafts. I found that students reported the cognitive strategies they were using as well as 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 and their instructors. 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 opportunities to practise idea generation by visualizing, self-questioning, predicting, using prior experience, and rapid writing; and students reported that they used these strategies and monitored their effectiveness metacognitively. 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 when she had to remember "certain passages" of her life, she had "nothing nice to say." Her tendency when asked to recall some previous

experiences was to "close" herself "in a cocoon very tight." Although this cocoon felt "safe" to Maria, she wanted "to be free as a bird, [to] flap my dusty wings in the air ... dress myself with new colourful, shiny feathers and explore my world to the fullest ... [to] know me, [to] 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 was "not too good to dig graveyards and disturb the dead." Later, however, she 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 her life on paper, the writing did not occur easily. She wondered what effect telling this story would have on her. "I [didn't] like the content but that's the only way I [could] try to forgive. I put myself in the quick sands because I [had] still the strength to come out alive again." Eventually, she finished the story and handed it in, her story "free, out of my soul ... [then I could] 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 free writing (Elbow, 1973) to help them generate ideas for a writing assignment. This technique was unfamiliar to all the students before I taught it 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[ed] and [had] 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, letting her “inner child write” she 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 [came] 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. She found it “difficult to sit down and all at once have these amazing ideas” and reported that brainstorming had “never been a strong point” for her. Instead, Alice said her ideas came to her as she wrote. Throughout the term, Alice continued to “let everything flow, but at the same time, to critique” what she’d written. Since Alice’s grade 12 essays consistently earned marks of 90% to 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 her ideas “in point form for each paragraph.” She found that grouping her ideas saved her valuable organizational time and was more effective than “the other way where my notes [were] scattered all over as I [thought] 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 [were] coming ... quickly." This strategy helped Stewart to capture his ideas before he forgot them.

In a grade 11 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[ed] 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, adult high school students may not

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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, causing a paragraph he had written for English Strategies to be late "due to computer problems."

*Isought 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 could decide to 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 center. 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 center personnel. At that time, she admitted in her journal that she "lack[ed] confidence." 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, and asked me in his journal to ask him if he had proofread his essay. 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 [the] 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 ended up relying on her own findings. 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 she was "really stranded."

## Discussion and Implications for Practice

Malicky and Norman (1995) stress that "one of the basic principles of adult education is to lead adult learners in the direction of becoming independent and self-directed" (p. 82). Teaching adult high school students a variety of cognitive strategies and helping them to monitor their use metacognitively is one way to help them become more self-reliant. It was gratifying to discover that the students who participated in this study made regular and effective use of writing strategies I taught in class, since this shows that they had begun to believe in themselves as independent learners and were beginning to take control of their learning. For students who have been unsuccessful in previous attempts at written expression, and whose low self-esteem may have caused them to believe their efforts would never produce positive results, discovering that they can use appropriate writing strategies is a major step forward. Students realized that generating ideas by visualizing, self-questioning, predicting, using prior experience, and rapid writing 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 a literary 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.

Encouraging students to choose from among the strategies introduced in class provided them with the opportunity to match strategies independently to their learning styles. In their final journal entries, both Stewart and Elizabeth were excited to have

discovered their personal "pattern[s] for practicing strategies that work[ed] best" for them. After trying rapid writing, Alice realized it was not a strategy that benefited her. Her practice of simultaneously generating ideas and writing about them resulted in essays that consistently scored high marks.

Elizabeth showed me that once adult high school students have been introduced to cognitive strategies and have chosen those that will best help them to succeed, they are capable of personalizing and extending those strategies. After I taught students to use their wealth of prior experience to generate ideas, Elizabeth personalized this strategy by using her background knowledge of literature to write about a phrase I provided in class, pretending it was taken from a novel or poem and she was its originator. Also, she began rapid writing not just for school assignments but at home, leaving paper all around her house so she could capture the ideas that came "out of nowhere, like a forceful river."

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. After handing in her essay, she experienced the freedom that comes with having successfully processed and progressed beyond unresolved issues. 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.

Most significantly, the students' increased cognitive awareness and metacognitive control, led them to "cognitive courage," "persistence in the face of failure," and "positive feelings of pride and satisfaction" (Braten, 1993). In his final journal entry, Trevor remembered the frustration both he and his readers had felt when trying to make sense of his writing before he took the English Strategies course. "I had lots of ideas to express verbally but couldn't get

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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 convoluted sentences will haunt you no more!" he joked. 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." 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."

There are likely a number of reasons for the students' effective use of cognitive strategies and metacognitive processes as well as their increased self-esteem. First of all, I modeled the strategies for students and shared my metacognitive processes while doing so. Therefore, they were not only able to access a strategy, but were able to see it in use and "overhear" how I was monitoring its effectiveness. Modeling 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 modeling and the in-class discussions that resulted from these "think alouds," I became aware that I need to break down information into easily learned chunks for adult high school learners and provide direct instruction in each skill area.

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 think metacognitively about 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 together we could address their writing challenges quickly and effectively. Also, journal use helped the students to experience for themselves the "reciprocal relationship" (McCrinkle & Christensen, 1995) that exists between cognitive and metacognitive strategy use, self-esteem, and attributional beliefs.

Since my study shows that students used many of the strategies I taught to successfully complete their writing assignments, and that they also enjoyed increased self-esteem as a result, I will incorporate the teaching of these strategies into future courses and 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. In the future, I plan to provide students with opportunities to share with their colleagues the ways in which they have personalized and extended the strategies I have taught. I also will provide class time for students to research, experiment with, and share 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 increased independent strategy use, metacognitive control, and pride in themselves as learners.

## Conclusion

The participants in this study showed me that taking the time to teach, model, and practice writing strategies with adult high school students can have many positive outcomes. They often begin to understand that they can independently choose appropriate strategies, think metacognitively about their effectiveness, and personalize and

extend the strategies they learn. Adult high school students may begin to see the benefits in approaching not only their writing but all their academic tasks with cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The sense of control and increased self-confidence they gain may then help them to believe in their ability to access, process, and think metacognitively about information in many areas of their lives, a prospect that is too exciting, and too important, to ignore.

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