

SRDS: Merging Formalism and Process Writing

Poor writing is not solely an academic issue. Corporations spend around \$3.1 billion and state governments spend close to \$221 million annually on writing remediation programs (Baker 304). As university acceptance policies change and more students are attending college, those who would have previously been left out of the pursuit of a higher education based on a learning disability are finding themselves being placed in entry-level writing classes. Studies show that students with learning disabilities generally write poorly, which leads to their placement in those courses. Learning-disabled students (LD students) also show the lowest quality of writing skills when compared to all other groups of students. This includes diversity of words used, length of written pieces, and correct use of grammar across various styles and disciplines (Baker 304). While poor writing may not be restricted to just the world of academia, that is where the debate on how to address the issue is taking place when it comes to bringing students with learning disabilities up to speed.

While LD students show no inability to “apply sophisticated syntactic structures in their writing,” their abilities are often masked by numerous grammatical mistakes (Gregg 334). Those grammatical mistakes mark the underlying argument for both formalistic approaches and self-regulated development strategies (SRDS). Holistic scorings of written language, however, have allowed researchers to evaluate students’ work based on the procedure used to create the text and not on specific frequencies or types of grammatical errors through mechanical error analyses (Gregg 334 & 335). Those studies argue that formalistic approaches have only attempted to address the symptoms of the students’ writing woes. Moreover, other researchers argue that grammatical symptoms may be used to diagnose writing problems that do not exist. Disagreements range from whether self-esteem issues cause behavioral problems or vice-a-versa.

Other disagreements exist as well. Some researchers argue that process writing only works if the student has the ability to eventually emulate what is traditionally considered “good writing.” If the student has underlying cognitive issues, those researchers argue, no amount of process writing will overcome those deficits. Others argue that the attempt to emulate good writing through peer-revision is beneficial to all writers. Any underlying issues of grammar will work themselves out through the process. While using process-writing seems to have won out when dealing with most entry-level writers, how to deal with LD students has, however, still not been resolved. As many researchers, such as Noel Gregg, point out, those students have underlying cognitive processing deficits that hinder their ability to excel using the standard writing process.(Gregg 335).

Based on Gregg’s research, while learning disabled and basic writers are usually taught in the same classroom, LD students require different objective-based approaches than basic writers and should be given their own classes. This approach is pushed by both the formalistic and self-regulated development strategies (SRDS), though SRDS calls for a more complex class development than the formalists (Gregg 335). The formalistic approach is primarily concerned with grammatical development and sentence-combining through an emphasis on syntax, punctuation, and the memorization of grammar rules.

Supporters of process writing argue that formalistic approaches lead to “teaching to tests” and focusing only on obtaining high scores, which, in turn, leads to student feedback and conferencing being ignored or dropped all-together (Kindzierski 51). Formalistic approaches, as contended by process-writing instructors, are fundamentally in contention with any natural form of learning. Students who are “good” writers, instructors argue, have an “adequate amount of awareness about their learning strategies” and they “develop a dynamic, reflective approach to

learning tasks, show willingness to take risk, guess most appropriately and attend to form as well as content” (Baroudy 49). Those skills, process-writing supporters argue, are learned naturally through process writing.

SRDS researchers contend that, based on the complex academic, behavioral, and social competencies that exist in each class and with each student, only individual programs can effectively teach writing strategies to students, especially those with learning disabilities (Sandmel 32). Along with those who push for process writing strategies, SRDS researchers argue that the core problem with any formalistic approach is “exclusive concern with the qualities of the finished writing or product, with little or no attention at all granted to the writer, the writing process, of the evaluation of work in progress” (Baroudy 45).

Formalist supporters, in turn, have called for the implementation of guided composition, which aims to focus the writer through all phases of text creation. In guided composition, the learning disabled student is given a structured environment where their specific, mechanically pinpointed cognitive process deficits are targeted and developed using grammar and sentence combining exercises (Gregg 336). The underlying idea behind a formalistic approach is that most learning disabled students have little problem with syntactic or content issues, but have, instead, grammatical composing issues to the point that their sentences become incoherent, mimicking the idea that they have nothing to say. Grammar development exercises are meant to alleviate those issues and allow the student to clearly develop their ideas into prose.

SRDS developers seem to agree with Formalists on the idea of structured guidance as they argue that LD student lesson plans should use a structured layout that teaches the background of an idea, the strategies that should be applied, the importance of the strategies in implementing the idea, how to memorize the steps of the strategies, how to carry out those steps

in groups, and how to carry out the steps alone (Baker 306). SRDS researchers do, however, split from Formalists on why structured education is needed. They instead fall in line with process-writers and agree that while LD students often make writing errors in much greater frequency and in different ways than others students, such errors are not fundamentally different than the errors made by “good” writers (Stringer 196). Good writers do not focus on grammar and do not attempt to create texts that are free of mistakes. Instead, they are fans of the writing process, saving grammatical issues for the editing stage (Baroudy 60). Supporters of the writing-process argue that instead of teaching LDS students to emulate good grammar, they should instead be taught to emulate the practices of good writers.

Good student-writers, according to Ismail Baroudy, share two major characteristics: they are all goal orientated and have the ability to construct representations of their audiences (Baroudy 47). Neither of those facts have anything to do with grammatical correctness. Instead, it leads to an understanding of what works as “good writing.” Good-writers can tell when their own writing and when the writing of others does or does not work well. This development is usually coupled with repetitious reading and writing. Students with learning disabilities don’t often read or write outside of the classroom, which leads to their inability to know what is or is not good writing, thus leading to their inability to revise their own work into something better (Kindzierski 52). This fact relates back to the question of cause-and-effect. Do students not read and write because they are not good at it, or are they not good at it because they don’t do it.

As we have seen, formalists do not place students in dynamic classrooms where teachers interact with them outside of the structured environment and structured activities. This approach does not get the student to read and write more on their own, which does nothing to develop their imagination or self-esteem (Kindzierski 53). Process-writing supporters argue that if the students

aren't taught new ways to interact, then they don't develop new skills. This in turn supports their theory that inadequacies come from a lack of practice, which can also be said for students with no learning disabilities.

Students with learning-disabilities routinely have low self-esteem arising from their non-inclusion in classes where they can interact in the creation of good texts. Instructors argue that process writing and peer-revision techniques allow disabled students to interact with advanced, risk-taking students who produce strong texts. Over time, those learning-disabled students also begin to take risks as their self-esteem improves, enabling them to create stronger and more complex texts as well (Stringer 196). This outcome can be attributed to the formalistic approach of teaching from "master" texts. Asking students to emulate "master" texts, however, is not an efficient learning method according to process or SRDS instructors. Instead, interaction with simpler, efficient texts and the emulating of the text-creation process, not the text itself, is more likely to lead to disabled students who are able to carry out the two most important aspects of most good writers: having strong goals and constructing representations of their audience.

While process writing has higher levels of success than formalistic approaches that study sentence structure and sentence fragments, they are not without flaws according to SRDS developers (Baker 305). The creation of large amounts of text with little instruction from the professor has also shown to be ineffective in many cases involving LD students. Even though creation of text is done in conjunction with good writers, emulating of good writers has never been shown to be universally effective with LD students, as they are often resistant to the process, and process-writing instructors still focus heavily on emulating strong texts, not on the emulating of the processes that good writers use. This flaw of the instructor is rooted in the structure of writing courses and the time limits that exist in the college setting. SRDS developers

argue that it is impossible to implement the writing-process method efficiently within the current education model.

Learning-disabled college students often claim that “they have ‘always mixed-up words’” when they are confronted with errors and weak structures or strategies in their writing, reinforcing their lack of self-esteem and resistance to the process (Stringer 198). Students are often unaware that what they are doing is ineffective or wrong. In fact, they have no real ability when it comes to measuring their own work. This inability to effectively develop their writing skills, based on the writing instruction they have previously received, often leads to what Formalist instructors label as “behavioral problems.” Behavioral problems are not the cause of poor writing or poor writing habits according to Process or SRDS instructors. Instead, behavioral problems are a symptom, as is poor writing, of deeper academic problems that arise from boredom from formalistic approaches that focus on discreet skills instead of peer discussion and interactive learning (Kindzierski 52). Learning-disabled students who take part in peer-revision sessions do not normally exhibit any behavioral problems or actions and, in fact, are able to make surface-level grammatical changes as they began to naturally learn effective strategies and structures from other students (Kindzierski 57). SRDS argues that while behavioral issues do seem to be yet another symptom of bad writing instruction, there is not one answer to fixing the problem, as the process-writing method does not give adequate time to developing a disabled student’s self-esteem or adequate time to read multiple texts.

Increasing students’ self-esteem - as their ease with understanding and implementing writing strategies, which directly lead to longer and more detailed texts, increases - always seems to be the answer to helping them move forward. Creating one method for doing that for any student, especially a student with a learning disability, is impossible. Unlike Formalistic or

Process strategies, SRDS strategies are tailor fit to the student. They do not move at the average speed of the class and are flexible, allowing for a return, revision, or deletion of any of the 6 SRDS steps as needed (Sandmel 24). Still, any SRDS developer will admit that no plan is perfect and no attempt to create a perfect writing strategy will ever be 100% effective.

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