

1-1-1986

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Recommended Citation

Bizzaro, Patrick and Toler, Hope (1986) "The Effects of Writing Apprehension on the Teaching Behaviors of Writing Center Tutors," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1137>

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The Effects of Writing Apprehension on the Teaching Behaviors of Writing Center Tutors

Patrick Bizzaro & Hope Toler

Although many studies about writing apprehension exist, the topic is still in its infancy. Among other things, researchers have neglected to study writing apprehension among various professionals who write on the job. Daly and Shamo found that writing apprehension influences both academic and occupational decisions. According to their study, highly apprehensive writers are apt to select courses, teachers and, subsequently, occupations that allow them to avoid writing.

Interestingly, these writers are not in every case weak writers. Lynn Bloom reports that many capable writers are apprehensive when their writing will be evaluated. In her writing-apprehension workshops, Bloom works with many successful writers, some of whom have published. Writing apprehension is not limited to any ability level and seems not to occur selectively among those professionals who have attempted to enter fields in which they believe they will not need to write.

Writing apprehension seems to arise among all writers in all fields, regardless of their abilities and successes as writers, not just because they lack skills—though many do—but because of their past experiences as writers. Still, researchers have not yet studied writing apprehension among those who have chosen as their career the teaching of English. And, what's more important to students, no one has seen if there is a correspondence between writing apprehension in writing teachers and their methods for



teaching writing. Is it possible, for instance, for highly apprehensive writers to pass on to their students the writing apprehension that the teachers suffer?

Although no specific causes have been determined for writing apprehension, Daly believes that it results from adverse teacher responses to early attempts at writing. After all, writing is an exposure of self to others, and this exposure affects a writer's self-esteem. We should keep in mind that an individual's self-concept develops over a lifetime: students perceive themselves to be good students or bad, good writers or bad, based upon their perceptions of themselves. And these perceptions are given to them by others, usually teachers. While writing apprehension is also learned, it is a specific response to a specific stimulus, "a general avoidance of writing and situations perceived by the individual that potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for the evaluation of that writing" (Daly and Miller 37). Writing apprehension, then, seems to be the result of low self-esteem as a writer.

We were interested in whether our tutors in the East Carolina University Writing Center suffer from writing apprehension and if a relationship exists between the types of writing apprehension tutors experience and the methods they employ in teaching and evaluating writing. As a result, we surveyed twenty graduate students, all teaching assistants in English at East Carolina University, who work with small groups of undergraduate and graduate students as well as in one-to-one tutorials in the Writing Center.

We chose Writing Center tutors because many of them behaved anxiously when they were asked to teach writing in tutorial situations. For one thing, the Writing Center at East Carolina is relatively new; some tutors exhibited anger and resentment when they found out that they were required to work in the Center. Informal discussions with these tutors suggested that many were not confident about teaching writing as a process because they were not confident as writers themselves. Conversely, tutors who were most confident as tutors seemed to be those who were most confident as writers. We wanted to see if writing apprehension corresponded in any way to specific teaching and evaluating behaviors.

One way we measured the tutors' confidence as writers was to have them complete a twenty-six item Writing Apprehension Survey developed in 1974 by John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller. In the spring of that year, Daly and Miller tested their survey in a study involving 164 undergraduate students from composition courses and interpersonal communication courses at West Virginia University. Their research indicated that their survey is reliable and valid for measuring writing apprehension. This

instrument was also used in Daly's studies of writing apprehension and SAT scores (1975), occupational choice (1976), and self-esteem (1983). Writing apprehension, according to Daly and Miller, is characterized by a fear of being evaluated, an avoidance of situations involving writing, a fear of being instructed in writing, a lack of confidence in the ability to express ideas clearly, and a sense that writing is neither an enjoyable nor a particularly important activity.

Using a factor analysis to interpret the results of the Writing Apprehension Survey, we isolated three types of writing apprehension: Evaluation Apprehension, Stress Apprehension, and Product Apprehension. Statements typical of each type of apprehension are as follows:

Evaluation Apprehension

- "When I hand in a composition, I know I'm going to do poorly."
- "I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas clearly in writing."
- "I never seem to be able to write down my ideas clearly."
- "I don't like my compositions to be evaluated."
- "I expect to do poorly in composition classes even before I enter."
- "I'm nervous about writing."
- "I don't think I write as well as other people."
- "I like seeing my thoughts on paper."
- "I like to have my friends read what I have written."
- "It's easy for me to write good compositions."
- "Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience."
- "People seem to enjoy what I write."
- "I have no fear of my writing essays when I know they will be evaluated."
- "Taking a composition course is a very frightening experience."
- "I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication."

Stress Apprehension

- "I avoid writing."
- "I like to write my ideas down."
- "I look forward to writing down my ideas."
- "My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on a composition."
- "I enjoy writing."
- "I have a terrible time organizing ideas in a composition course."
- "I'm no good at writing."

Product Apprehension

“Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.”

“Writing is a lot of fun.”

“Handing in a composition makes me feel good.”

The measurement of teaching behaviors, however, posed a problem since, short of observing twenty teachers working in the confined space of the Writing Center, no device existed for the purpose of studying what teachers do when they teach. As a result, we developed an eighteen-item Teaching Methods Survey, which explores teaching behaviors that are characteristic of a process or a product approach to the teaching of writing.

In developing this survey, we were chiefly concerned with finding out what kind of teaching is done within the Writing Center confines—that is, with small groups of students and one-on-one tutorial sessions—instead of teaching performed in front of large groups or in classrooms. We wanted a survey that reflected what we believe should go on in the Writing Center.

We believe, for instance, that the tutor should perceive interactions with students as social occasions. We ask that tutors pay particular attention to their body language, their eye contact with their students, and their seating arrangements (beside rather than in front of their students). We want our tutors to realize that good tutoring often results from asking good questions and that the best learning takes place when students make discoveries about their own writing. We believe that if tutors pause long enough, students will take advantage of this opportunity to talk about their writing. In return, tutors should summarize and paraphrase what students have said about their writing.

Consistent with this attitude toward tutoring, we want our tutors to see that error is often systematic, that it represents an opportunity for students to improve. Tutors should keep in mind, however, that students are more apt to improve if they come to feel good about themselves as writers and learners. Such “good feelings” seem to arise when tutors lead students into a discussion of writing, beginning with strengths in a given piece of writing and ending with a discussion of how the writing can be improved. And we believe that the best results occur when tutors write with their students, discuss writing from the perspective of writers, and discuss writing as a process, beginning with matters of content and then later focusing on matters of grammatical correctness. In fact, to reinforce this attitude toward tutoring, we deal only with student writing, never relying on grammar, punctuation, or spelling exercises.

To identify these qualities of effective tutoring, we developed a Teaching Methods Survey that reflected four approaches: Process Approach,

Student-Centered Tutorials, Product Approach, and Teacher-Centered Tutorials. Statements characteristic of each approach are as follows:

Process Approach

"I seldom give students more than one opportunity to assess their writing."

"I concentrate first on the content of my students' writing."

"I seldom make direct eye contact with my students."

"I perceive tutorial sessions as social encounters."

"I seldom tell students that error is a sign that improvement is possible."

"I can identify steps I follow in each tutorial session."

"I seldom ask my student about problems other than those related to writing."

Student-Centered Tutorials

"I often summarize and paraphrase what my students have said about their writing."

"I pause long enough to give my student an opportunity to talk during the tutorial sessions."

"I ask questions that cause students to comment on strengths they see in their own writing."

"I seldom ask questions that cause my students to discover how to improve their own writing."

Product Approach

"I seldom search for the cause of my students' errors in their writing."

"I seldom mention my students' strengths in their writing."

"I seldom wait for students to make discoveries about their own writing."

Teacher-Centered Tutorials

"I seldom speak to students or call them by their names when I see them outside of the Writing Center."

"I write with my students."

"When tutoring, I sit beside my students."

We then used these factors to create a writing apprehension/teaching behaviors index that reflected the correlations among the three types of writing apprehension and the four approaches to tutoring:

Type of Apprehension	Process	Student-Centered	Product	Teacher-Centered
Evaluation	-.083	.039	.348	-.006
Stress	.239	-.014	.232	.107
Product	-.144	.148	.100	.162

The strongest correlations are between writing apprehension and the Process and Product Approaches. Specific correlations exist between Evaluation Apprehension and Product Approach, between Stress Apprehension and both Process Approach and Product Approach, and between Product Apprehension and the Teacher-Centered Approach.

These findings suggest a rather strong correspondence between various dimensions of writing apprehension and specific teaching behaviors exhibited by these twenty tutors in the Writing Center. Those tutors who, as writers, expect to do poorly tend to avoid mentioning strengths in their students' writings and do not sit beside their students during tutorial sessions (sitting instead in front of them in what we believe is an adversarial position). Tutors who lack confidence in their own abilities to write clearly and who do not like being evaluated, even by friends, not only fail to search for the causes of errors in their students' writings, but seldom wait for students to make discoveries about their own writing. In short, tutors who experience evaluation apprehension run tutor-oriented tutorials in which the students actually make very few discoveries about their writing for themselves.

Tutors who avoid writing, primarily because they have difficulty organizing material, tend to focus on sentence- and word-level errors in their students' writings. For such high-stress tutors, tutorial and small group sessions are not opportunities for social interaction with students. Rather, such tutors seldom lead discussions which give their students more than one opportunity to discover the cause of their errors. Ironically, as formal as these kinds of tutorial sessions must be, the tutors cannot identify specific steps they follow in conducting tutorials.

Finally, those tutors for whom writing is not an enjoyable experience and for whom expressing ideas in writing is not particularly important do not write with their students. We ask tutors to write along with their students in order to demonstrate to the students that writing is a valuable skill that the tutor relies upon in various ways, whether it be to record observations in students' folders or to reconsider personal experiences in a journal.

The information derived from this study is useful in our attempts to provide better service to those students and faculty who visit the Writing

Center. Our study clearly suggests that there is a correspondence between specific dimensions of writing apprehension and specific teaching behaviors. And we believe that, if we can provide a training program that reduces the apprehension of tutors or, at the very least, makes them aware of their apprehension and how it is reflected in their work with students, we will make the Writing Center a more relaxed environment for students and tutors alike and a place where effective tutorial and small-group teaching takes place.

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Patrick Bizzaro directs the Writing Center at East Carolina University, where he employs the findings detailed in this article to teach graduate assistants how to work in the Writing Center.