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Adults learning to write: exploring alternatives to functional writing

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On the one hand, a great deal of correction may simply be overwhelming and discouraging to struggling writers, without any resultant improvement. However, because of the students' perception that 'teachers correct errors', and their expressed dislike of not knowing whether they were right or wrong, I would compromise and include a certain amount of error correction. My personal solution would be to correct communicative writing lightly and any specific language exercises more rigorously. Another possibility would be to focus on a particular grammatical feature that is fundamental to a type of text, such as past tense in a narrative.

5.3.3 Working with students' personal resources

5.3.3.1 Autobiography and memories

Adults come to class with many experiences of life. Autobiography has been seen as an important means of facilitating adult learning and development (Brady, 1990). As we bring our story into the present, we do more than simply recollect past events; we search for meaning and build order in our present-day lives. Brady stresses the link between the intellect and experience that begins in the senses and involves the emotions. Autobiography can thus help adult learners to merge cognition and feeling into an integrated whole.

The women involved in this study were able to bring their memories into vivid focus, reflect on them and sometimes to change their perceptions of the events in their lives. The memories provided a rich source of material to write about. Based on the sort of writing that students were able to do, I would suggest that autobiography offers a powerful learning tool in the teaching of adults.

5.3.3.2 Oral literature in the students' primary language(s)

Students possess resources in the language forms they have been exposed to since childhood: stories, riddles, games, proverbs, songs, hymns, oral history, mythology, jokes, rhymes. All of these provide rich material that can be drawn on, brought into the class, reflected on, discussed and written about. It is helpful to find out the primary language name of different oral literary forms as students are not always familiar with the English terms. It could be motivating for students to write books of children's stories, games or oral history for their grandchildren, for example. In addition, by bringing these forms into consciousness, the teacher might help students to realise the linguistic riches they already possess. Within an urban context some of the oral forms may have fallen into disuse and discussion with the students could be helpful to find out whether this has occurred and to what extent.

5.3.4 The use of journals

The use of daily journals is in part related to the assumption that one learns to write by writing frequently. It has been argued that journal writing is a mode that encourages a flow of words and helps to provide access to one's thoughts through the medium of writing (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Writing a daily journal does not have an immediate and clear purpose, however, unlike other writing where the reader is clearly oneself (an address book, a reminder note) or someone else (a letter, a bank form.) For someone from a non-literate tradition, it may seem a strange and purposeless thing to do. For whom is it written? While not everyone enjoys writing a daily journal, and the two students I taught frequently complained about the repetitive nature of their work, I suggest that within this context, there is value, both linguistically and

cognitively, in doing so and that it offers a place for regular and partly self-generated writing.

The purpose and value of a journal needs to be clear to the students. It is important to provide adequate models of what is possible, in the beginning and later at intervals when motivation to continue may be flagging.

Scaffolding of the journal writing is important. As part of their homework tasks, students could be invited to respond to books or articles they have been reading, offer their opinions on a recent event, or talk about what they enjoyed (or did not) in class, for instance. There is value for the teacher in feedback on the teaching and also in getting to know the students better. Students could also be invited to read out portions of their writing in class, if there is a level of trust present and if issues of privacy have been addressed.

Journal writing, like some other aspects of literacy may well be a gendered activity (Barton, 1994). I am not sure how men would take to this task. My impression is that on the whole women would find it easier to do.

Dialogue journals might well extend the possibilities for writing in a journal, where the teacher enters into dialogue with the students. Staton (1991) has discussed the relationship of a written dialogue of this nature to adult learners' needs.

5.3.5 Publishing

Publishing offers a number of benefits: it provides an opportunity for students to see their own writing in print; it gives a reason to write; it offers a more permanent and legible form of the writing; one can read writing done by other

students; and the audience of readers can be extended, to include families and friends of the writers. Booklets could be exchanged with those produced by students at other centres. Editing of texts to be published would need consideration and this could provide opportunities for a focus on specific grammatical features in the learners' writing.

Zamel (1992) has described some of the benefits of creating their own texts for adults who are learning both English and literacy (as well as for children with limited literacy and English language). She argues that texts in which students have recorded their experiences and considered their own realities have a resonance for them and have the potential to become the basis for literacy development (1992: 469-470).

5.3.6 The need for reading in a writing course

There seems to be general agreement amongst educators and researchers that 'reading helps writing' (Spack, 1988; Weaver, 1996). Zamel takes this idea further, arguing that reading and writing are 'complementary acts' that should not be segregated. Thus teaching reading also means teaching writing (and vice versa). She suggests a number of pedagogical possibilities: as well as responding to texts in writing, students could prepare to read a text by writing about an experience (for example, starting work) that features in the text they are about to read, to establish connections between their own experience and that of the writer. This sort of preparation allows students to bring their own knowledge and cultural background to their reading (Spack, 1985, quoted in Zamel, 1992).

Wales (1990) argues for the importance of massive exposure to the printed word for ESL literacy learners, who will benefit from access to a variety of materials: books, posters, labels, recipes, reports, newspapers, etc. Learners need a great

deal of appropriate input, much as those learning to speak a language need much oral input.

Despite the shortage of easy reading for adults (French 1990) and the demands of providing appropriate reading material for inexperienced adult readers, I would seek to make reading a more integral and inter-related part of future writing courses, as part of every class and each week's homework task.

5.3.7 The use of scaffolding

Vygotsky has stressed the social nature of learning. As the child interacts with others in his or her environment, a variety of internal developmental processes operate. Once these are internalised, they become part of the child's independent ability (Vygotsky, 1978). The child's peers, or her teacher, can create a 'zone of proximal development' for her, as can play. Vygotsky also noted that we use all four language modes, listening, speaking, reading and writing, when we learn something.

Scaffolding the adult students' writing with discussion, drama, play, discussion of reading or visual modes such as pictures, cartoons or videos, is an important way of creating a 'zone of proximal development' which provides both motivation and content for writing, as well as other assistance that students might need.

5.3.8 The need for awareness of students' perceptions

Both teachers and students come to the class with many assumptions, sometimes hidden and unspoken (Rogers, 1986). As far as possible, these need to be brought into the open. It is important for the teacher to receive feedback from

students, to find out if students are achieving their learning goals. However, not all the 'values, experience and knowledge' of mature students are likely to be helpful to the learning to be done and teachers of adults need to be aware of the difficult and painful nature of 'unlearning' - which may be resisted. Adult learning might involve anxiety, self-doubt and challenge (Brookfield, 1986). While teachers generally wish to meet needs that learners have expressed, this does not mean that teachers should simply provide exactly what the students want. Brookfield notes that facilitators 'are professionally bound not always to take learners' expressions of learning wants and needs as the sole criteria for all curriculum development and instructional design' (1986: 97).

Rogers stresses the importance of confirming the adulthood of adults, which would mean that certain expectations of students (for example, to be passive and simply receive knowledge from the teacher) would not be fulfilled. The teacher also needs to make sure that the 'new' knowledge she offers does not simply lie on top of the older patterns, but 'enmeshes' with the older knowledge. Rogers suggests that this might mean both an exploration of the previous knowledge, and the way it was acquired. Autobiography offers one way to examine previous knowledge and its acquisition (Stein, 2000; Bailey et al, 1996).

5.4 Conclusions

This case study has documented the responses of two literacy learners to a meanings-based writing intervention. A number of issues were brought into focus and these are outlined below.

The study highlights the importance of learner perceptions and beliefs, the effect these may have on subsequent learning and the potential difficulty of the

'unlearning' process for adult learners. As far as possible, therefore, the teacher needs to become aware of what these beliefs are.

The study supports the use of scaffolding of the writing of novice writers and points to students' ability to do considerably more with support than they may yet be able to do on their own.

It also highlights the value of drawing on resources which the students already possess. These include memories and autobiography, or the oral literature of a student's primary language, such as narratives, proverbs, riddles, jokes or hymns. The close relationship with her primary language and the possible emotional association with forms which may initially have been encountered in early childhood, may provide a student with a sense of ownership of her writing. She is also the sole 'owner' of her memories (Bailey et al, 1996). The importance of students' personal involvement in writing is borne out by this study.

Finally, the study points to the value of regular and sustained writing, for development in expressive uses of language, grammatical accuracy and fluency. As students took risks with syntax and vocabulary and used written language for sometimes new purposes, they developed in confidence and ability both to express their meaning and to use written language with greater grammatical accuracy. In many ways, the findings of this research support the dictum that 'one learns to write by writing.'

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APPENDIX 1

IEB EXAMINATION

ABET, LEVEL 2

2020



INDEPENDENT EXAMINATIONS BOARD

ABET Level 2: Communication in English

12 June 2002

Time Available: 3 hours

Surname : _____

First Name : _____

Student Number : _____

Centre Name : _____

Centre Number : _____

Time Started: _____ **Time Finished:** _____

Name of Invigilator: _____ **Signature:** _____

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READ THIS FIRST:

1. Please read the questions carefully.
2. Answer all the questions.
3. Use a blue or black pen only
4. Enjoy your exam.

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Section A

Read about Mr Ruele

In February, Jackson Ruele (77) had a heart attack. His kidneys were also giving problems. He stayed in hospital for a week. Then he went to stay in his daughter's home. When Mr Ruele left the hospital, the doctor gave this note to Sarah Ruele, his daughter.

Dr D. S. Radebe
Healthy Days Hospital
12 Jason Moyo Drive
Sophiatown, 2014
Tel/Fax: (011) 342 6651 Cell: 083 296 4744

Dear Miss Ruele

Please make sure that your father takes the following tablets at the right time of day.

Red tablets (heart): 2 tablets in the morning

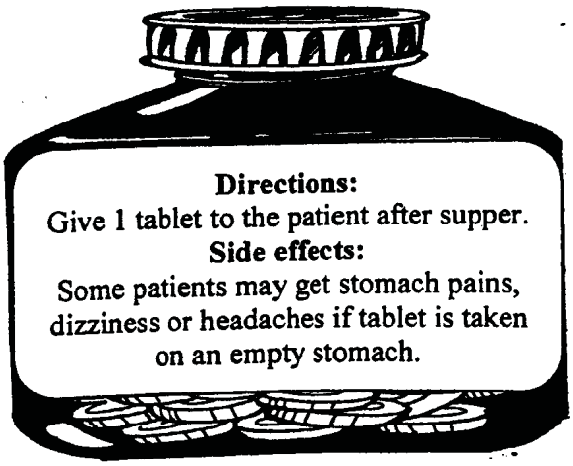
Blue tablets (kidneys): 1 tablet in the evening

Here are some things you can do to make your father feel better:

1) Put some pillows under his head when he is lying down. This will make him more comfortable.
2) Try to get your father to drink 2 litres of water every day. This will help his kidneys.

If you have any questions or want to speak to me, please feel free to phone me at either of the above numbers.

Here is the bottle of one of the tablets Mr Ruele must take. **Read the label.**



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1. Answer the following questions

a) Why was Mr Ruele in hospital?

_____

_____

(2 marks)

b) What did Dr Radebe want Sarah to do for her father?

_____

_____

_____

(2 marks)

c) Mr Ruele must take his tablets at the same time every day.
Write the correct **colour** of the tablets underneath the times:

7 pm	8 am

(1 mark)

2. Say whether these sentences are True or False (✓)

Mr Ruele must take three different kinds of tablets.	True ☐	False ☐
Mr Ruele will feel better if his head is higher than his legs when he is lying down.	True ☐	False ☐

(2 marks)

3. **Think about the note and the information on the tablet bottle**

One night, Mr Ruele did not eat supper. He took his medicine and went to bed. Later, he woke up with a terrible stomach ache. Sarah decided to read the information on the tablet bottle. **Look at the medicine bottle.**

a) Which tablets gave Mr Ruele a stomach ache?

_____

(1 mark)

b) Why did Mr Ruele feel sick that night?

_____

_____

(2 marks)

c) What do the words 'side effects' mean? Use your own words.

_____

_____

_____

(2 marks)

4. **Write your own opinion**

Do you think people must take care of their old parents?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Why do you say so?

_____

_____

_____

(2 marks)

5. **Fill in the form**

On 21 May, Mr Ruele had to go to hospital for a heart operation. He needed to stay in hospital for two weeks. He had to fill in a form when he got to the hospital. **Fill in the form for Mr Ruele. Do not fill it in for yourself!**

Healthy Days Hospital

Hospital Admission Form

Surname: _____ **Initials:** _____ **Title:** _____

Age: _____

Name of family member: _____

Initials and surname of doctor: _____

Doctor's address: _____

_____

_____

Doctor's telephone number: (011) 342-6651

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

(7 marks)

[Total: 21 marks]

Section B

Sinelungelo helps abused children



Children in South Africa have many problems. Some children are abused and others have no parents because of AIDS. A new organisation to help these children started last year at Khotso House in Marshall Street, Johannesburg. The organisation is called *Sinelungelo*, which means 'We have a right'.

The number of abused children in South Africa is growing. Zanele Ngwenya works for the *Sinelungelo* organisation. She says: "One out of six children is abused in South Africa every day. Many people think that nothing is done about the problem. They are wrong!"

The staff at *Sinelungelo* try to help these children by giving them a loving place to stay. The staff play with the children, take them on trips, and give them lots of hugs and kisses. *Sinelungelo* looks after children whose parents do not look after them properly. The organisation also cares for children who have HIV, or children whose parents have died from AIDS.

Sinelungelo works with the Chris Hani Baragwanath, Coronation and Johannesburg hospitals. When children need special care, *Sinelungelo* sends them to these hospitals. For example, a fifteen year old girl was raped and badly beaten by her mother's boyfriend, so they took her to hospital. They also took a little boy whose mother locked him in a shack with no food when she went to work. The boy nearly died of hunger. Zanele tells the story: 'We told the woman to leave the child at a crèche, but she said "no". Many people do not know that leaving young children alone for a long time is abuse.'

Sinelungelo, hospitals, and many other organisations help abused children. But Zanele thinks ordinary people also have an important part to play. She says, 'People in the communities need to break the silence of abused children. Speaking out can help to change the lives of these children.'

Adapted from *Homeless Talk*, January, 2002

1. **Answer these questions**

a) Why was *Sinelungelo* started?

_____

(1 mark)

b) What do the *Sinelungelo* staff do to help children?

_____

(1 mark)

c) Why does *Sinelungelo* work with hospitals?

_____

(1 mark)

d) Who does Zanele think must also help to stop child abuse?

_____

(1 mark)

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2. **Say whether these sentences are True or False (✓)**

Child abuse in South Africa is getting worse.	True ☐	False ☐
Sinelungelo is the only organisation in South Africa that helps abused children.	True ☐	False ☐

(2 marks)

3. **Think about the story**

a) Why is the organisation called *Sinelungelo* ('We have a right')?

_____

_____

_____

(1 mark)

b) Why do you think *Sinelungelo* also helps children whose parents have died from AIDS?

_____

_____

_____

(1 mark)

c) Which child will *Sinelungelo* send to hospital? Tick (✓)

☐ A girl who has run away from home because she hates her stepmother.

☐ A boy whose arm has been broken by his father.

☐ A boy who is scared to play with other children.

(1 mark)

Give a reason for your choice.

_____

_____

(1 mark)

d) What does it mean to 'break the silence of abused children' in the last paragraph? Use your own words.

_____

_____

_____

(2 marks)

4. Write your own opinion

a) Many people think that not enough is done to fight child abuse in South Africa. What can you do to fight child abuse? Give two ideas.

_____

_____

_____

_____

(3 marks)

b) What do you think must happen to people who rape children? Tick (✓).

☐ Jail

☐ Death sentence

Give a reason for your answer.

_____

_____

_____

_____

(2 marks)

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c) Some people say that one way to punish people who abuse children is to put their names in the newspaper so that everybody can know them. Do you agree with this idea?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Give a reason for your answer.

_____

_____

_____

_____

(2 marks)

[Total: 19 marks]

Section C

Think about a time when you had a problem. Write a story about how a person helped you with this problem. Tell us who the person was, and what the problem was. Also tell us how this person helped you and why.

Your story must have at least three paragraphs and be longer than one page.

APPENDIX 2

IEB EXAMINATION

ABET, LEVEL 4

4020



INDEPENDENT EXAMINATIONS BOARD

NQF1 (ABET Level 4): Communication in English

5 June 2002

Time Available: 3½ hours

Surname : _____

First Name : _____

Student Number : _____

Centre Name : _____

Centre Number : _____

Time Started: _____ **Time Finished:** _____

Name of Invigilator: _____ **Signature:** _____