



Building a scholar in writing (BSW): A model for developing students' critical writing skills



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ABSTRACT

Several authors have highlighted the importance of writing in developing reflective thinking skills, transforming knowledge, communicating expressions, and filling knowledge gaps. However, difficulties with higher order processing and critical analysis affect students' ability to write critical and thoughtful essays. The Building a Scholar in Writing (BSW) model is a 6-step process of increasing intricacies in critical writing development. Development of critical writing is proposed to occur in a processed manner that transitions from presenting simple ideas (just bones) in writing, to connecting ideas (connecting bones), to formulating a thesis and connecting key components (constructing a skeleton), to supporting ideas with evidence (adding muscle), to building creativity and originality (adding essential organs), and finally, developing strong, integrated, critical arguments (adding brain). This process symbolically represents the building of a scholar. The idea of building a scholar equates to progressively giving life and meaning to a piece of writing with unique scholarly characteristics. This progression involves a transformation in awareness, thinking, and understanding, as well as advancement in students' level of critical appraisal skills.

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Introduction

"At its best, writing has helped to transform the world. Revolutions have been started by it. Oppression has been toppled by it. And it has enlightened the human condition"

[The National Commission on Writing \[NCW\], 2003, p.10](#).

Undeniably, writing is a powerful method of learning. Among teaching/learning methods, writing is reported by students and midcareer professionals to be the most helpful skill for academic and career success ([Çavdar and Doe, 2012](#); [Hyland, 2013](#); [Lengelle et al., 2013](#)). Writing can transform knowledge, advance

consciousness, and build reflective, problem solving, and critical thinking skills ([Çavdar and Doe, 2012](#); [McCutchen, 2011](#); [Rowley, 2012](#)). The role of writing in building critical appraisal skills is of particular relevance; especially for university students who are expected to represent their knowledge in writing by making critical connections within subject areas, and generalizing ideas to other contexts. Commonly, difficulties with higher order processing, thought provoking questioning, and critical analysis affect students' ability to effectively demonstrate critical understanding in essays they write ([Campbell et al., 1998](#); [Golding, 2011](#)).

Students can be positioned to acquire critical writing skills ([Golding, 2011](#)). However, while current writing models/approaches emphasize the importance of higher order thinking in writing, only a few prioritize clear pedagogical processes for developing critical writing skills (e.g., [Atherton, 2011](#); [Santangelo et al., 2007](#)). Further, most writing models emphasize classical rhetoric (arrangement, style, memory and delivery) and the use of teacher feedback to improve writing (e.g., [Morrell, 2003](#); [Wardle and Roozen, 2012](#)). While writing approaches and strategies can be supportive to writing development, stimulating students' critical writing development requires the use of practical, processed,

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and familiar methods that are grounded in academic literary perspectives and broader socio-linguistic contexts (Aitchison, 2009; Çavdar and Doe, 2012). A lack of such pedagogical approaches to critical writing development presents a gap in creative and progressive writing resources for educators. The aim of this article is to introduce and discuss the Building a Scholar in Writing (BSW) model. BSW uses a 6-step perspective to develop university students' critical writing skills. Using anatomical representations and step-by-step instructions between the 6 progressive stages of writing, the model demonstrates that critical writing development is a dynamic interaction of prior and new information to construct knowledge.

Common difficulties in scholarly writing

Students may be very knowledgeable about a given subject or domain, but have difficulties applying their knowledge to the writing process (Hyland, 2013; Kellogg, 2008). Common writing difficulties among students in higher education include weak or absent evaluation of theoretical assumptions, weak construction of arguments, lack of support for arguments, disorganized presentation of thought, lack of elaboration and integration, and lack of critical appraisal (Çavdar and Doe, 2012; McMillan and Raines, 2011). A major challenge for students is the development of writing skills needed to critique and process retrieved information (Çavdar and Doe, 2012). Santangelo et al. (2007) argue that this challenge in translating and developing information into critical writing stems from students' tendency to focus on generating content, and neglecting evaluation and critical appraisal. Many student writers continue to place emphasis on the "form and the mechanics, rather than the substance or process" of writing (Santangelo et al., 2007, p. 2). In effect, difficulties with critical thinking and inquiry predominantly affect students' ability to write insightful and thought-provoking essays (Campbell et al., 1998). The ability to critically examine learned content enables students to maintain multiple representations of their knowledge and generalize this knowledge to diverse disciplines and contexts (Atherton, 2011; Kellogg, 2008).

Essays are generally used as evaluative methods of students' learning. Therefore, writing problems are frequently detected and addressed with teachers' feedback. However, many students struggle to integrate instructors' feedback to improve the outcome of future papers (Çavdar and Doe, 2012). Consequently, sustained writing difficulties, may be due in part to the lack of integration of a pedagogical process into curricula to support students' critical writing skills development (McMillan and Raines, 2011). Guiding students' skills in writing necessitates the use of writing tools that can cultivate and refine these skills. Practical and familiar methods to stimulate students' understanding of critical writing development from beginner (writing what the individual knows) to matured writer (crafting critical knowledge) are therefore vital (Kellogg, 2008; Kennison, 2006).

Writing development models/approaches

The importance of writing has sparked the development of various writing models/approaches. The most prominent of these models are consistent in their emphasis of the importance of critical writing development (e.g., Morrell, 2003; Wardle and Roozen, 2012). However, few models present practical, structured, and comprehensive strategies for critical writing development. The majority emphasize ongoing writing feedback and instruction from a teacher as the key strategy for improving writing. For instance, in the *Critical Composition Pedagogy* (Morrell, 2003), the teacher uses an unstructured form of guidance to help students write as engaged

citizens. The emphasis is placed on students developing compelling arguments by exploring dominant social structures, and envisioning alternatives to unequal relations of privilege and power. Critical text is central to the student's experiences, and concurrently becomes personal, political, and transformational (Morrell, 2003). The *Ecological Model of Writing Assessment* (Wardle and Roozen, 2012) calls for a richer and fuller awareness of students' experiences in the writing process. With the integration of ethnographic methodologies, the teacher provides students guidance to assess and incorporate a wide range of experiences in writing. Various genres, textual knowledge, and practices are used to inform and mediate students' writing development (Wardle and Roozen, 2012). In other models, dedicated time for instruction and training is the priority. For example, the *Cognitive Developmental Perspective* (Kellogg, 2008) offers structured apprenticeship to develop students' writing skills. Like perceptual-motor skills development, critical writing requires dedicated time (about 2 decades), instruction, and maturation. The basis of assumptions is that only with executive attention can students develop knowledge-transforming skills that facilitate their movement from novice to expert writers. However, this kind of attention from a teacher, among increasing organizational demands, is unrealistic.

Two models provide a more comprehensive and staged approach to writing development; however, they are less directional, practical, and pedagogically robust in comparison to BSW. First, the *Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD)* model provides an instructional pattern for facilitating writing development (Santangelo et al., 2007). Aimed at making writing flexible, habitual, and automatic, the model is effective in "content knowledge, strategic behaviors, self-regulation skills, self-efficacy, and motivation" (Santangelo et al., 2007, p. 7). The SRSD model is comprised of six instructional stages reordered, modified, or repeated for flexibility and ease to follow. Teachers and students collaborate to create a writing strategy that best suits students' needs, which can then be used for other writing assignments. Unlike BSW, the creativity and exploration required to advance critical writing at each stage is emergent. Second, the *Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO)* taxonomy is a structured format that helps track the development of a learner's writing skills (University of South Australia, 2011). The taxonomy has five distinct stages of writing development: pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, relational, and extended abstract (Atherton, 2011). The stages build on each other, from basic to complex writing skills; emphasizing progression and hierarchy in writing at each stage. The taxonomy does not mention the level of teachers' involvement and strategies for writing advancement. While BSW aligns best with the SOLO taxonomy in structure and progression, SOLO is less developed in pedagogical description and critical writing advancement strategies. As well, the anatomical representations used in BSW complement nursing students' prior knowledge and understanding for ease and intrigue in the writing process.

Description of BSW

BSW is a 6 step process of increasing intricacies in critical writing development (Fig. 1). Development of critical writing is proposed to occur in a process that transitions from presenting simple ideas (just bones) in their writing, to developing strong, integrated, critical arguments (adding brain). The figurative idea of building a scholar equates to progressively giving life and meaning to a piece of writing with unique scholarly characteristics. This progression involves transformation in awareness and thinking, as well as advancement in students' level of critical appraisal skills. The paradigm of constructivism underpins the BSW model. According to constructivism, knowledge is developmental (Fosnot,

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