Short and Long-term Effects of Writing Intervention from a Psychological Perspective on Professional and Academic Writing in Higher Education – The EFL Writers' Workshop

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Abstract

Writing in higher educational settings is regarded as problematic for all but the most dedicated people (Silva 2007). Many of the problems come from psychological sources deeply rooted in writing experiences (Boice 1990). However, the literature addressing this is generally missing. A survey of writing-books, manuals, and research studies indicate that most approach writing from linguistic, stylistic, and rhetorical perspectives (Silva 2007). This study attempted to fill this gap by examining a group of ELT graduate students attending a writing workshop which specifically addressed psychological barriers to productive writing (Boice 1990). The eight-week seminar consisted of classroom sessions in the first week and then moved to an online course management platform. The primary aim of the study was to note the changes in the students using data from their weekly writing reflections and discussion board comments in several forums and nine-month follow-up group interviews. Findings indicate that the workshop had immediate effects on the writers but as the time passed, the effects faded. The study looked to Threshold Concepts Theory (Meyer and Land 2005) as a possible theoretical explanation for the loss of the temporary positive workshop results.

Introduction

Most educators will agree that writing for academic purposes in English as a foreign language (EFL) environments involves an ability to express one's ideas effectively in a foreign language as well as responding appropriately to specific disciplinary writing demands. A review of writing books and course books confirms that linguistic, stylistic, and genre issues are foremost in writing instruction concerns, both in first language and second / foreign language settings[1]. What is missing from most academic writing books and courses is an approach that seeks to address problems and issues that impede academic writing which stem from often deeper levels, those having to do with our self-conceptions, motivations, and abilities to control behaviors and emotions associated with academic writing. However, despite a large body of literature on the

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[1] Searches were conducted on the topic using search terms: writing intervention, writing seminar, writing and affective factors, necessity for publication, and searches linked to hits on these terms using primarily Science Direct, Google, and Google Scholar.

psychology of writing, spanning much of the 20th century, writing intervention in academia for the most part seems to have ignored this aspect of writing (Boice 1990[2])[3].

This study attempted to address this gap by trying to understand the psychological factors associated with academic writing via an intervention based on Boice (1990) though the experiences of a group of L2 students (described below) who attended an academic writing seminar designed to address those factors.

Similar Recent Studies

As mentioned above, there are very few current studies examining the *emotional* factors associated with writing. This section briefly reviews some of the few studies found to help situate the current study in the literature. One of the names that comes up most frequently in database[4] searches is Rowena Murray. Her published studies represent themes such as the writing consultation (e.g. Murray *et al.* 2008), using the writing retreat as a writing intervention (*e.g.*, Murray 2008 and Murray and Newton 2009), and improving the writing confidence and skills of health workers in physiology (e.g. Murray and Newton 2008). All of these studies approach writing from the emotional perspective and suggest interventions that address psychological factors of writing as well as linguistic issues. Other studies look at graduate students and the role of writing groups as intervention in writing problems via taking the mystery out of writing, audience awareness in writing, and handling writing pressure (e.g. Cuthbert and Spark 2008). One other study looked at anxiety associated with libraries, statistics, and composition in students from non-statistical disciplines writing their research proposals (Onwuegbuzie 2002).

Although not a recent study, one (Larson 1988) examined 'flow', writing, emotional issues and writing success. The results indicated two major categories of emotional responses to writing: *disruptive emotions* and those *emotions that contributed to the successful completion* of the writing. The disruptive emotions involved *anxiety* (over-arousal) and *boredom* (under-arousal). Anxiety created feelings ranging from 'slight agitation to existential dread' (Larson 1988: 152). The anxiety was expressed in anger directed at the assignment, teachers, parents and people not involved in the assignment. Fear and being 'plagued by inner voices that are critical of everything they [wrote]' were also present (Larson 1988:153). Under-arousal also led to disruptive emotions. The chief emotion in this area was boredom. This state most often occurred while the students were engaged in the actual writing of the paper. What we can understand from this study is that emotions, both disruptive and facilitative, factor into writing success and even writing enjoyment. The study also points to the role of deliberate strategies to manage emotions so they do not become uncontrollable and destructive. This supports the use of writing interventions that address the complex set of psychological factors involved in writing.

According to Boice (1990) and the literature that he provides in his annotated bibliography and the studies carried out by Murray *et al.*(2008), and others cited above, it seems clear that addressing writing problems from this perspective is a worthwhile pursuit. For this reason the present study sought to understand and examine the effects of writing intervention from this angle.

Study Description

This study looked at a cohort of 15 L1 Spanish speaking graduate students who were in their last year of a two year ELT graduate program. All of the students were currently teachers of English as a foreign language in various levels of education (primary to tertiary). As part of their graduate

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[2] Boice (1990) has constructed an annotated bibliography of over 100 works which have addressed blocking and other writing problems. His aim was to identify patterns and construct an historical perspective of the psychology of writing.

[3] From an internet search on terms in footnote 1 much of the commentary on the psychology of writing appears to be associated with creative writing.

[4] (See footnote 1).

program the students participated in an eight week writing seminar that focused on the elements of time management, personal psychological barriers, how the students responded to knowledge of those factors, and how that awareness affected their writing during the seminar and in the following nine months after the seminar.

Thus, the primary aim of the study was to record the changes evident in the students using data mainly from their weekly writing records submissions and their discussion board comments in several online forums (see the methods section below). The product goal of the seminar was a prepared manuscript for publication. The students chose their paper from previous course assignments (papers they thought were good based on their evaluations and their course instructors' feedback). The educational goal of the seminar was the changing of writing habits and attitudes towards writing via Boice's (1990) 'Four Step Program' incorporating 1) automaticity 2) externality 3) self-control and 4) sociality into the writing process.

Because all of the students were English language teachers, language issues in writing were not the primary focus of the seminar, although all their writings received feedback (peer and instructor) associated with language issues in the manuscripts they chose to prepare for publication. Thus, while language management issues are often a significant source for procrastination and other blocking behaviors, because the students were turning completed course assignments into publishable articles, procrastination specifically stemming from language problems was not seen as a factor in this study.

Method and Course Description

The data sources for the study came from 1) the online course delivery usage statistics (not reported in this paper) 2) the contents of the discussion boards (reading comments and writing reflections) 3) follow-up group interviews and 4) follow-up short email surveys.

The writing seminar took place during the summer of 2010. It was part of the formal instructional program of an ELT Masters' program in a public university in Mexico. The seminar was a hybrid course; one part was face-to-face and the other was online. The face-to-face component was carried out in the first week of the course. The remainder of the course was online using the course management program Blackboard. In the 'groups area' students carried out their peer evaluations of their writing. They were assigned to a group which rotated every week for their weekly revision of the paper they were working on for publication[5]. The rotation ensured that they were receiving a wide variety of peer feedback on their writing and providing the fourth element in Boice's plan – sociality.

The overall design of the course was based on several factors. The most influential design factor was based on the students' expressed writing needs. To establish their perceived needs, at the end of the first week students were asked to identify a writing goal for the seminar. In response to the students' goals, the writing element of the course was the preparation of an existing paper for publication. However, to achieve that primarily linguistic goal (producing a written work), several approaches were built into the course plan. Conceptually, the course was divided into three sections: 1) the contextual level 2) the psychological level and 3) the linguistic level. The contextual level was presented in the face-to-face sessions of the first week and consisted of the overall idea that there is much more to writing than language management. The discussions presented the concept of *immersion* into wider discourse communities as a form of professional development. The basic idea of the discussion was that through writing, professionals in academic settings, as these students were, become increasingly involved in their professional communities. So writing was pictured as a vehicle to professional development.

The second concept in the course components, and the focus of this research, involved the psychological elements of writing. The discussion centered on the question raised in Boice (1990: 7): if writing 'brings more professional rewards than anything else a professor can do, then why

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[5] One student's paper was accepted for publication in 2010 and another's in 2011.

don't we do it?' For many of the students this was the first time they had really thought about their writing from these perspectives. They were accustomed to regarding their writing as only a process of manipulating linguistic features to achieve 'acceptable academic writing' (the third course component). The course, then, followed Boice's (1990: 93) Four-Step Plan as they went through the various actions to prepare their papers for publication (e.g. finding a target journal, editing their papers to conform to the journal requirements, peer editing stages, instructor editing, and so on).

While they engaged in those activities, they moved though the Four-Step Plan which involved developing 1) writing automaticity 2) externality 3) self-control and 4) writing sociality. The results are based on their reflections as they moved through the four steps.

All participants agreed to be in the study by signing the consent form in accordance with university policies.

Discussion of the Results

Discussion board analyses (RQ1)[6]
To approach the answer to the first research question, we created five sets of dichotomous codes (Table 1) based on writing blocking variables identified in Boice (1990) that were observable in the research group. These were used to classify the students' weekly discussion board entries. In Boice (1990) the variables are presented as blockers or variables that impede productive writing. In order to track the changes in students' dispositions towards writing throughout and after the course, we formed the variables into sets of positive and negative variables (Table 1). The first three blocking variables are from Boice: working habits and attitudes (Boice 1990: 13); work habits and busyness (Boice 1990: 14); and internal censors (Boice 1990: 8). To allow us to track changes we added the dichotomous variable 'IS': 'IS-' Reverting to old habits but showing knowledge of the new strategies or 'IS+': showing evidence of incorporation of the writing strategies. We developed the codes inductively (i.e. after reviewing the discussion boards).

Table 1: Psychological writing factors used to categorize the discussion board data.

Code	Category
-HA	Working habits and attitudes (incorporating negative attitudes: fears of failure, censors, perfectionism)
+HA	Working habits and attitudes (comments indicating positive attitudes)
-HB	Work habits and busyness (incorporating procrastination and time management)
+HB	Work habits and busyness (comments indicating positive changes)
-CN	Internal censors working to undermine writing productivity
+CN	Internal censors under control and no longer undermining writing productivity
-IS	Reverting to old habits but showing knowledge of the strategies
+IS	Incorporation of strategies (comments about changes made specifically associated with strategies presented in the course readings and lectures)

With respect to RQ1, students' attitudes, as expressed in the discussion boards, seemed to have changed from negative to more positive during the seminar period. The changes apparent in the students' attitudes are broadly illustrated in Fig. 1 below. The category showing the most change was the evidence showing the incorporation, or lack thereof, of the strategies presented in the workshop. This might be because strategies are something concrete and therefore easier to write about. However, the other categories follow somewhat the same pattern from more negative comments to more positive.

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[6] RQ1: How did their writing attitudes seem to evolve throughout the course?

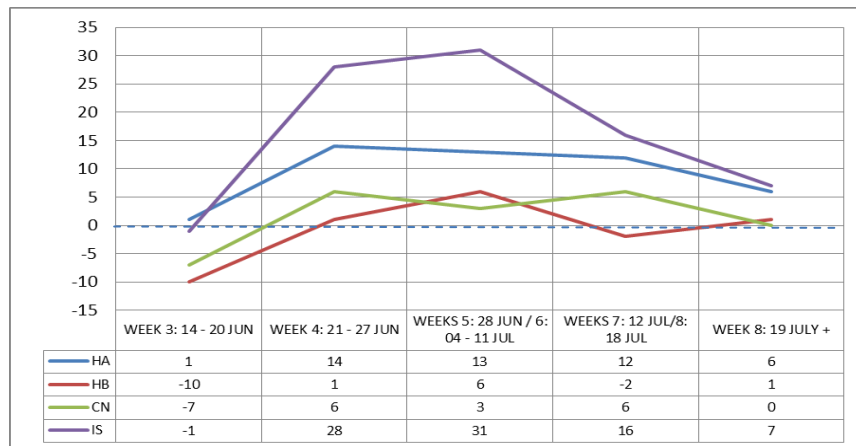|	WEEK 3: 14 - 20 JUN	WEEK 4: 21 - 27 JUN	WEEKS 5: 28 JUN / 6: 04 - 11 JUL	WEEKS 7: 12 JUL/8: 18 JUL	WEEK 8: 19 JULY +
HA	1	14	13	12	6
HB	-10	1	6	-2	1
CN	-7	6	3	6	0
IS	-1	28	31	16	7

Figure 1: Changes in students' attitudes through the course. The figure is divided into the five principal time frames of the discussion boards (14 June through 19 July). The discourse was coded for the occurrence of utterances classified into one of the four categories. For each of the weekly periods, the codes were summed from all the participants to arrive at the collective picture of attitude change.

Figure 1 describes a burst of strategy uptake and similar expressed changes from more negative attitudes to expressions of more positive writing attitudes. However, after that first flush of change the occurrences of utterances expressing their attitudes (Fig. 1 above) slowly declined or levelled off over the final weeks of the writing seminar. There are a variety reasons for that, which range from acceptance and adoption of attitudes and strategies, and thus no longer having the need to talk about them, to measurement issues. Tracking these reasons down is beyond the scope of the present paper. However, the downward trend observed in Fig. 1 continued and was evident in the findings from the last two research questions reported in the section 'Follow up interviews' below. First, however, a discussion follows regarding the various categories reported in Fig. 1.

Habits and attitudes
Through the eight weeks of the writing seminar students reported experiencing some changes in their habits and attitudes toward writing. In some cases the feelings changed into positive ones. But in other cases students still showed an internal fight with their psychological barriers. There were expressions of disappointment and of not meeting goals but other more positive comments as well. Since the workshop was constructed on the Four-Step Plan many of the comments in the first weeks were positive comments regarding the adoption of 'spontaneous' and 'generative' writing strategies. Those are the focus of the first step in the plan. The other four steps build on the establishment of these daily writing habits.

Creating those positive writing habits was the principal reason for using Boice's (1990) Four-Step Plan in the writing seminar. The plan consists of writing problem intervention from the four perspectives: *1) automaticity 2) externality 3) self-control 4) sociality.* The first two, establishing *automaticity* and recognizing and accommodating *externality*, have to do with establishing writing momentum and creating an external stimulus / reward system to create a value in writing production beyond the intrinsic. Getting control of our 'self-talk' is the focus of the third step. This involves recognizing and recording negative self-talk occurrences and then replacing them with positive 'scripts' that neutralize the habitually engaged negative scripts. Making writing a social activity is the focus of the fourth step. Becoming part of a writing group, engaging others in your work, anticipating criticism, and seeking feedback are parts of the process of the sociality of writing.

As clearly evidenced in this study, the students' writing was fraught with bad habits. In particular, as they reported in the discussion boards, their writing tended to get done after every other obligation was dealt with. There were a lot of comments about not being in the *mood* to write and the only thing that changed the mood was a looming deadline. Many of the students, after reading Boice (1990), realized they actively engaged in 'binge' writing – otherwise known as 'all-nighters'. Those who recognized this behavior saw a difference when they started to practice spontaneous and generative writing on a daily basis.

Habits and busyness

The students were all very busy. As well as being graduate students, they were full-time English language teachers. Many of their comments focused on lack of time and how busy they were. In a widely cited study, Burton (2005) found four principal reasons why teachers do not write: 1) Lack of time 2) Lack of writing support 3) Lack of confidence in their abilities to write and 4) Lack of reward or recognition as teachers when they do write. However, beyond self-reported conceptions of how busy teachers are, there are studies which examine time allotted to various activities that show gaps in schedules where writing on a regular basis can be added (Boice 1990). Most people conceptualize writing as needing large blocks of time, but according to Boice, small regular blocks of time dedicated to writing are much more efficient in terms of productive writing than waiting until there is ample time to write, which tends to lead to binge writing and all the negative results that go along with it. It is much more important for people who have very little time to engage in time management than those who have lots of 'time to manage'.

Time management was of course a central strategy of the Four-Step Plan. The students created writing spaces and writing times. In the discussion boards they made a number of glowing self-observations about their new found ability to manage time and their writing:

> Now, I realize that I really like to dedicate time for my writing and I consider I am improving little by little. I am really happy about it (P15).

> I stopped being stressed about my housework and now to write in the mornings is my priority; after that I take the rest of the day to do what I have to do. It is just having the dessert before the main meal (P10).

> I have had good experiences while developing my writing without being under pressure. I really enjoy writing in this way. I think I will adapt it as a good habit. I really need to do it (P15).

> I have been able to organize my time and these days I have realized that I am able to do different things that I have to do and I also dedicate enough time for my writing. I feel proud of myself (P5).

> I do not want to feel under pressure to write for an hour because if I do not do it, I feel frustrated about not reaching my goal (P3).

Internal censors

The 'internal critic' is one of the most debilitating forces students face when writing. The students' discussion board comments show how they were under self-imposed pressure. It is clear to see how students/writers with this problem suffer and often are blocked to such a degree that they never finish a paper to the level of perfection they want. P15's comment below is particularly representative of the inner voice and how it tried to prevent writing:

> Related to the self-control, I have lived the experience of negative talk most of the times. I sat in front of the computer and a loud voice in my mind told me 'you are not ready', 'you have to read more in order to clarify your ideas', 'now, you do not have enough time to do it', 'you can start to do your writing later', 'now you are very tired and stressed to do it', 'you are not in the mood of writing', and things like that. In the past, I heard to this voice all the time when I knew I had to write something. In some situations I paid attention to it and obeyed and quit my writing. In some others I tried to ignore it and I started writing. I was probably able to ignore it for some time; however, I was very negative to do that and I quit the activity after 10 or 15 minutes.

Boice (1990) considers Freud's idea about the internal censor as a major impediment to productive writing. Freud, in *Interpretations of Dreams,* called it the 'watcher at the gate'. Those watchers are our internal censors about our own work; their main job is to examine the ideas by 'rejecting too soon and discriminating too severely' (Boice 1990: 8). Common strategies of these 'watchers' (*internal critics* as Boice calls them) involve inducing 'bad feelings about our own writing […] [and undermining] our ability to generate ideas, creativity, and confidence' (Boice

1990: 9). If the writer does not first recognize the existence of the inner critic and, second, try to suppress it, productive and fulfilling writing is doubtful.

Incorporation of the strategies

The comments expressed by the students show very positive attitudes towards the incorporation of the various strategies. This was, in fact, the category which showed the greatest amount of change over the course (Fig. 1 above). Some of their self-observations gave hope that their writing habits had been positively changed:

> When I was reading chapter 6 I felt identify me with many things that I read. However I realized that since I started reading this book I had changed some of my bad habits. Now I didn't pay attention about what looks bad around me, for example I turn my computer on and I start writing wherever comes to my mind. (P7)

> Despite that rejection or law of delay I practice, I should say on my favor that I also identify myself when considering the environment where I am writing. I do have a regular place, my sacred place. As soon as I am preparing my writing session, I tidy my place on a couple of minutes and that triggers that positive attitude I need to start. A cup of coffee and a full jar are necessary, too...cold coffee, by the way. If possible, working at several periods in a day, if not, since ten or eleven at night. I am good at avoiding distractions, I don't usually lose concentration (when I reach it). I am also able to recognise that I need music to encourage myself, but sometimes I do recognise music could be damaging. (P8)

> Unfortunately, I have to admit that my habits are not that good. I write in binges, I am just learning how to organise this activity, our schedule is becoming a core motivation tool for me, probably because I am a visual person. The last week I discovered myself writing on a piece of paper because I *wanted to*. I think I must work on goals, sharing and organization. Mmm... just a few things, right? I think I am taking the right step with our writing schedule and our peer revision exercise. However, a long way to go is still waiting for me. Great reading, isn't it? (P3)

> I can also notice that we're carrying out those four steps (automaticity, externality, sociality and self-control) in the activities that we have been asked to do. For example, in externality, I have been doing spontaneous as well as generative writing. As for externality, my goal for this week is to write more than one page of generative writing. Regarding self-control, I have been disciplined with my writing so far. However, I still listen to that internal voice telling me not to write. I must confess that I sometimes feel afraid of going back to the old habits. Sociality has also been a very useful activity. Having my paper read by others has helped me see how my paper can be improved. I totally agree with the author when he says that 'most writing is, after all, a social act'. (P10)

However, once the supports of the course were taken away, these strategies faded away as discussed further below. The fight they faced, as many writers do, was apparent in all the comments. In this study, the intervention – the writing seminar – raised their awareness of these problems. It moved their awareness beyond the surface linguistic level. Many successfully incorporated strategies and changed attitudes toward writing. But what happened after the course? The following section addresses the final research questions regarding their long-term incorporation of the changes experienced in the course.

Follow-up group interview analyses (RQ2 / RQ3[7])

Nine of the fourteen students were interviewed and emailed follow-up open-ended questions nine months after the writing seminar. All of the students were in the process of writing their masters' thesis and other assignments as part of the graduate program at the time of the follow-up. The

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[7] RQ2: What changes persisted in the students' writing habits and attitudes six months after the seminar?
RQ3: What might explain the permanence or lack of permanence of the habits and attitudes according to the participants?

students indicated that they still recognized the importance of time management and productive writing although almost all of them admitted that they no longer managed their writing time well. The prewriting strategies of spontaneous and generative writing seemed to have remained with most of the students. A number mentioned the importance of the social aspects of writing they experienced through the peer reviewing processes in the writing seminar. Those who mentioned the sociality element also stated that they missed it and that the current lack of it contributed to their backsliding into their old writing habits. And finally a number of them said they began writing journals during the seminar and have kept on writing in them as a useful tool for reflection and as a writing strategy. The following table shows the summary of new habits and the return of old writing habits.

Table 2: New writing habits and old habits that have returned

What has remained as a new writing habit?	What old habits of writing have returned?
Spontaneous writing Reading for writing	Not writing regularly
Avoided procrastination because of finding a dedicated writing time	No time for SW or GW
Using a research diary	No writing schedule (time management)
Spontaneous writing Generative writing More conscious of organization Doesn't see writing and a punishment anymore but as an enjoyable activity	Time management The internal censor is winning battles again – negative talk.
Sociality – shares her writing with others A writing journal Time management Generative writing	Lacks intrinsic motivation to write. Time management
The necessity of writing to release feelings. Misses the sociality	Binge writing. Not worked collaboratively Not writing everyday Bad daily organization
More confident with writing. Open to criticism from others (sociality) Spontaneous writing for emotional release. Has formed a writing habit Time management with scheduled writing times.	No regular writing and other things interfere with writing times

Students were asked to try to identify why they thought they may have lost some of the good habits and writing strategies. This provided clues to the answer for the final research question.

Table 3: Why old habits returned

Why do you think the old habits have returned?	
Does not have the habit of writing for pleasure … writing is something academic to hand in	Has not been able to control daily organization
Too many other responsibilities	Time management
No pressure to do it	procrastination
Reverted to long held old writing habits	No commitment to self
The old habits = comfort zone.	The course provided a kind of benchmark to work towards or maintain
New habits were not completely established	Can't concentrate on writing because of
No support after the course	distractions

As summarized in Table 3, they needed things like deadlines and pressure to motivate them to write. Others mentioned issues of time management and lack of responsibility or commitment to themselves as elements that stopped their good habits.

The second question asked them to come up with things they thought would help them reactivate the attitudes, habits and strategies they started in the course (see Table 4).

Table 4: What would they need to get their good attitudes, habits and strategies back.

What would you need to get back into the positive things you mentioned in your messages?	
Someone who cares and wants to know about the difficulties	Having the sociality
To establish a fixed writing time	Has the resources – but doesn't implement them
External motivation like grades	Depends on 'me'
Refocusing on the new habits	Reminding herself to stay focused on the writing task.
Being conscious of own writing	Planning. Setting goals
Teacher guidance again	Discipline (she's delaying the end of writing because of fear of failure)
Working together	
Reducing distractions like internet	

Part of the Four-Step Plan stresses the importance of the sociality of writing. Some of their comments indicate the benefits they found from working together during the course. Others seem aware of the need for self-discipline, time management, and planning. They seem to *know* what they need, and yet they persist in their old unproductive writing habits for the most part. Clearly there are complicated issues surrounding productive writing and moving from the state of unproductive to productive. One explanation for part of this is suggested in the next section.

Conclusion

This study attempted to trace how students' writing habits and attitudes changed through incorporating productive writing habits and attitudes, leading to more enjoyable writing, which in turn aimed to contribute to more productive writing practices. Follow-up interviews showed students' reflections on the workshop and their writing habits, both good and bad. In spite of the reported awareness of the improvement they obtained through the use of different techniques, as time passed they lost many of the good (short-term) habits and writing strategies they gained during the writing seminar. They mentioned they needed deadlines and pressure to motivate writing, also better time management, and more personal responsibility and self-control. They seemed to be highly conscious about the importance of using the Boice's Four-Step-Plan. They seemed to be conscious about what they needed, but in the end they returned, for the most part, to their old unproductive writing habits.

This result seems paradoxical given the apparent adoption of the strategies and the changes in attitudes towards writing exhibited during the course. The following section suggests a possible theoretical explanation for these findings.

Threshold concepts and liminal spaces
Threshold concepts theory was identified and developed initially by Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land (2005) who recognized through their study of economists that there were certain elements in a discipline that were held to be essential in the fundamental understanding of any disciplinary field. Those elements possess seven distinct characteristics (Cousin 2009). What seems to be most illuminating to the findings of the current study are those characteristics associated with personal identity and the discomfort and disequilibrium the acquisition of threshold concepts can engender. While all of the characteristics shed light on the study topic, one in particular seems most relevant:

Liminal states
This discomfort and disequilibrium associated with identity change can be associated with a 'liminal state' which is an intermediate state between not knowing and the acquisition of knowledge. The state is described as unstable and learners may 'oscillate between old and emergent understandings' as part of the process of learning (Cousin 2009: 204). Cousin (2009) likens the liminal state to the period of adolescence when a person is no longer a child but not quite an adult. The person may display child-like behavior in one moment and adult-like behavior in another until the adult identity becomes stable enough to become part of the person's identity. In entering a discipline, for example, one is a 'learner of history' (to use Cousin's example) and gradually with an acquisition of the 'knowledge, skills and subject matter', identity will move to the state of being a 'historian' (Cousin 2009: 204).

Being in a liminal state implies that the person is in a developmental process leading to mastery. The development is not a smooth transition but a process which can cause feelings of disequilibrium and confusion. Cousin (2009: 204) describes possible scenarios played out in liminal learning states:

> Some learners hover at the edges in a state of pre-liminality in which understandings are at best vague. Some will fake understandings (mimicry); some will frequently get 'stuck' and most will oscillate between grasping a concept and then losing that grasp. Now you see it, now you don't. The recursive movements that precede mastery (which is not always achieved, of course), are expressive of dynamically related cognitive and identity shifts.

This struggle for understanding and shifting identity is played out in much classical literature and world mythologies as the hero must go through trials, often life threatening, and has a number of experiences – often solving puzzles to get out of an experience – before she or he emerges as a new person with new understandings and a new identity. Often the identity places the person in a different (higher) status within the community. This possible outcome of changed status and identity often causes resistance at the beginning of the journey or learning process.

In the writing seminar many threshold concepts were put forward related to the area of being a productive writer in academic settings. It is clear that for the most part these participants were (at the time of the study) oscillating between becoming writers and staying as students of writing. They were all in varying liminal states. Their moving into a state where their identity as writers emerged depended, as they have stated, on a combination of personal willpower, self-discipline, and control of emotions, such as fear of failure, fear of identity change and external aid from the sociality aspect of writing.

Further research
As often happens, the study has raised questions that merit further research. As the eight week intervention was ultimately not enough to permanently change writing habits, several questions arise: What amount of time is needed to establish permanent changes in writing habits? At what point do writers feel they can become independent of instructors – is there a moment? If not, how can permanent intervention-type resources be set up in institutions to encourage ongoing productive writing? If the underlying issues are associated with identity, how can writers be helped to move from *students of writing* to *writers*?

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