An Analysis of the Role of the Facilitator in the Professional Writing Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

During the past century, a lot of research has been done and books published on the traditional roles of teachers. Teachers play such a crucial role in educating children and society as a whole that Oeser (1973) is moved to declare, "the rate of learning is affected by the relations between teacher and pupil" Now with current trends in economic and social development, the roles of teachers are shaped to a considerable extent by the changing goals of education. Instead of simply providing knowledge, education is now regarded as a stepping stone towards a better quality of life, a better job and a higher salary and finally a move up the social ladder.

In this paper I intend to investigate the possible roles for teachers to facilitate the acquisition of written skills by professionals from the business community Investigation into these roles will involve looking at the traditional roles of teachers and outlining some of the commonly practised ones for discussion purposes. I will also investigate a profile of learner variables which may affect learning success and which facilitators need to take into consideration when designing a course and conducting classes. Before ending with suggestions on possible roles of teachers in a non-academic setting, I will evaluate critically the traditional roles of teachers in terms of their strengths and weaknesses and discuss the implications for facilitators of professionals writing courses.

Fulfilling these different needs and motivation of learners, such as improving their writing skills to communicate more effectively and for promotional purposes, tends to be the main

objective of a professional writing course. This being the case, does a teacher in a professional writing class then play the same role as those who are involved in teaching in an academic setting? What kind of personal relationship should exist between the teacher and the adult learners? To what extent should support and guidance be given to the learners? This being a course meant for adult learners from the business community, how much of business knowledge should the teacher arm herself/ himself with before going to class? To answer these questions, in addition to examining the traditional roles of teachers and working out a learner profile, I will also look into the purposes of writing in the workplace and the kind of writing that is done at work

OBJECTIVE OF PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to put forth a tentative proposal for the role of teachers in our local professional writing classroom. This proposal will be tried out at the pilotting stage of this project, after which any modification may be made where necessary. I will now review the traditional roles of teachers that have been estabished and are being practised in the modern-day academic classrooms.

THE TRADITIONAL ROLES OF TEACHERS

The roles of teachers in a traditional classroom are many and varied. Therefore, only a few commonly practised ones as outlined by Prodromou (1991) in his article, "The Good Language Teacher" will be highlighted for consideration here.

First, the most obvious role of a teacher in the traditional classroom is that of a presenter of information (Prodromou:1991) As a presenter of information, a teacher is expected to enter a class and dispense knowledge in the subject matter, of which he is an expert be the subject matter business studies, languages or the sciences. Ideally, at the end of the class, students will have been better informed with the knowledge imparted by the master

The second general role of a teacher is that of a controller of activities (Prodromou.1991). In his capacity as a teacher, he not only presents information, but he is also the controlling figure in generating various activities pertaining to the subject matter presented. A lively and interesting language class is, it

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is believed, the result of careful planning and execution of various activities by the controller

Another usual function of a teacher is that of an "assessor of correctness or error" (Prodromou 1991). This is a vital role of a teacher in a learning process in order to ensure that students learn what is taught. Being the party responsible for dispensing knowledge in a learning environment it is only to be expected that the teacher assesses the performance of his students.

Apart from the above, with the evolution of the system of education to cater to the demands and needs of the present-day society, teachers have had to assume other roles that are considered equally important to the traditional ones.

Teachers also play the role of a manager, such as when they give instructions for students to get into groups or to carry out any class activity According to Prodromou (1991), the concept 'classroom management' describes the many things that teachers do in class that may be elusive but which are crucial to the dynamics of the lesson and without which a lesson may fall apart at the seams.

In addition to the above, today a teacher also needs to act as a counsellor and social worker to his students. This happens when a teacher advises students on any social problem or how to approach a task that is given to them Sometimes a teacher finds it necessary to discuss a student's personal problems that may affect his performance in his studies. These are new responsiblities peculiar to our present-day learning environment.

Two other responsihilities worth mentioning here are teachers as monitors and facilitators. In this capacity, a teacher is required to adopt a suitable monitoring technique to monitor students' progress in the topic being taught. An example of a monitoring act would be when a teacher moves round to listen to students practising a dialogue or when a teacher gives a quick quiz at the end of a lesson. A teacher facilitates when he provides materials and guidance to enable students to work on their own.

The world today is changing rapidly In **The Teacher In a Changing World.** Goble (1977) noted that the general trends of change seem to include trends.

1.   towards more diversified functions in the instructional process and acceptance of more responsibility for the organization of the content of learning and teaching;

2. towards a shift in emphasis from transmission of knowledge to organization of the pupil's learning with maximum use of new sources of learning in the community;

3. towards wider use of modern technology and acquisition of necessary knowledge and skills.

(Goble: 1977)

The above are the traditional roles of a teacher plus the more recent changes brought about by economic development in a country as noted by Goble. As evident from what Goble says regarding change, a teacher must continually update his skills and knowledge and adapt the latest teaching techniques in order for students to enjoy the benefits of modern technology. In a professional writing classroom, the roles of the teacher up to a certain extent would not be unlike those of the traditional roles. However, "the teacher's specific functions are very deeply influenced by the general goals of education in his particular society", says Goble (1977). Therefore, to determine the functions of a teacher in a professional writing class it is necessary first of all to discover the purpose of writing for professionals from the business community and to investigate their needs. "Writing done in non-academic settings" say Odell and Goswami, "differs markedly from the typical classroom tasks" (1985). This seems to imply that the relationship between the teacher and the learners towards achieving the desired style of writing must also be different from the usual teacher-pupil relationship. Before discussing the teacher-learner relationship, let us consider the target learner-motivational level, time constraint, attitude and the kind of writing done.

THE LEARNERS

Learners in professional writing classes are expected to be individuals from the workforce who do a lot of writing, be it in the form of reports, memos, letters, proposals or notes. "Each of the writing situations", according to Faigley (1985), "differs substantially from typical classroom writing tasks"

Individuals who join this course may come with many different motives. Some may want to improve their writing skills with the aim of getting a promotion or there may be some who simply want to excel generally in the workplace. Whatever the reason,

learners are likely to be highly motivated but lacking in time and probably confidence. As Harvey (1986, p. 28) wrote "all human behaviour is more or less motivated. .. teachers do not create students' needs but the needs are created by environmental factors... or by students' internally felt needs (e.g. the desire to communicate socially or professionally with foreign counterparts... or the desire to succeed academically or professionally)".

It is evident then that learner variables affect learning success. Among those variables that are worth highlighting are the normal mode of learning by learners; expectations regarding "good learning" and motivation to acquire the writing skills.

Since learners in professional writing classes are going to be individuals from the workforce, it is to be expected that learners will have a high level of maturity But despite this, facilitators have to remember that our learning culture is such that our learners are teacher-dependent and learning is the result of passive memorization of textbooks and lectures (Adam-Smiths:1986, p. 74).

As a result, the learner's perception of good learning and the facilitator's perception of the same may differ markedly There is a need then for learners to be made aware that in professional writing classes, the concept of "good learning" needs to be redefined. Good learning in this situation requires active involvement from each learner in carrying out tasks provided.

According to Gardner and Lambert (1972) as mentioned by Harvey (1986) in his article "The Role of Motivational Variables in ESP Settings", two types of motivation are especially relevant for language learning, and they are integrative and instrumental With regard to learners from professional settings, there is little necessity to awaken them to the usefulness of learning writing skills since they are instrumentally motivated towards the skill.

How important is the writing skill to the business community? Anderson (1985) in his article "What Survey Research Tells Us About Writing At Work", concludes that writing is one of the most important job-related skills for most college graduates. This is further reinforced by Storms (1983) as mentioned by Anderson. Storms asked 837 business graduates of Miami University (Ohio) how important the ability to write well would be to someone who wanted to perform the respondents' present job. 74% replied that the ability to write well would be at least "very important" and 30% said it would be "critically important"

(Anderson 1985). This confirms the fact that writing does play a vital role in enhancing one's career opportunity in a work place. This in turn affects the attitude of the learners who should regard writing classes positively

EVALUATION OF TRADITIONAL ROLES

After assessing the student profile and highlighting some of the traditional roles of a teacher, it would not be wrong for me to say that the roles are not far removed from the traditional roles and a professional facilitator could very well benefit from observation of these roles as well as developments in ESP However, there is a need for us to evaluate each role highlighted earlier before it could be adapted for professional writing classes.

Taking into consideration the nature of the responsibility of a facilitator in a professional writing classroom, what kind of information need the facilitator present to the learners? According to Swales (609 p.9) as quoted in Harvey (1986), "the ESP teacher may be viewed as a "purveyor of information about the language and as an orchestrator of its acquisition" This seems to indicate that the facilitator's main concern is to present knowledge about the technique of writing involved in a business community and not so much about the conceptual content of the subject matter But still Strevens (608 p.42) as quoted by Robinson (1981), recommends: "Become familiar with the language of the subject"

With regard to the second traditional role of a teacher discussed earlier, that is, as a controller of activities, some level of flexibility needs to be exercised here depending on the needs of the learners. A facilitator in a professional writing class needs to tailor – make activities based not on hypothetical situations but on real day-to-day writing needs of learners for meaningful learning to take place

The traditional role as an "assessor of correctness or error" is equally important in professional writing classes. It seems inappropriate to expect the facilitator to assess correctness of content, but at the same time it is impossible to assess accuracy of language use without taking into consideration content. This is an area that needs careful consideration on the part of the facilitator

In the professional writing class the teacher's traditional role as a counsellor and social worker may not be applicable. However, a facilitator may need to act as a consultant when he

is required to diagnose each learner's language and communication needs. So instead of counselling, facilitators need to discuss with learners their needs in order to plan programmes for improvements (Robinson 1991)

The two responsiblities of a facilitator that need to be redefined in the professional writing class are those of monitoring and facilitation of learning. Compared to these roles as applied to the typical classroom situation, in a professional writing class there is a greater urgency for the orientation to be facilitating student's progress from teacher dependence to self-directed learning. Learners at the end of the course must attain the means to monitor their own progress and be critical of their own performance and ability

SUGGESTIONS FOR POSSIBLE ROLES OF A FACILITATOR

Having discussed some of the important roles of teachers and having given a rough student profile, I will now put forth some recommendations on the role of the facilitator in a professional writing class while at the same time answer some of the research questions posed earlier Basically, the traditional roles of the teacher still apply but with a lot of modification to suit the different needs of adult learners.

In a writing class in a non-academic environment, learning needs to take place in a learner-centred situation with students taking active roles in attaining the objective of the course. Although students are driven by "internally felt needs" (Harvey 1986), facilitators need to help learners identify the "externally set requirements of the professional world with regard to English"

A facilitator's role is also to create an environment conducive for learning to take place, for example, by insisting on having a 'fixed' room in which to conduct classes and provide materials and guidance. This is reinforced by Harvey (1986) when he states that "classrooms are environments with their own psychological atmospheres where teachers and learners interact and it is the teachers' responsibility to create an environment which allows for adequate outcomes for students' needs and goals"

Of course, teaching is still an important role of the facilitator But how much business knowledge should the facilitator have in order to guide the learner efficiently? It would be appropriate to assume that at the level the learners enter the course, they

are already exposed to the conceptual content of the subject matter and that they must understand that in the writing course, subject matter knowledge is taken as given and that they are going to be provided with language and writing skills to communicate the knowledge they already possess. The facilitator can recognise textual structure and in helping learners to rewrite their text to produce an acceptable piece of writing, the facilitator is also indirectly acquiring some business knowledge.

Although teaching should not be the focus in a writing class, the facilitator must at all times function as a guide and a source of support. Anson and Forsberg(1990) in a "writing internship" course for college seniors at the University of Minnesota, wrote that "instead of using a traditional pedagogy, that is, presenting principles of composition or asking students to write practice essays, we taught the internship course as a workshop involving group analyses of the participants' work-related drafts and discussions of issues in their writings'. I tend to support this approach. With the facilitator as the leader to guide the students, this could work very well with a professional writing group. The facilitator could start by asking learners to bring authentic documents or materials to be used as writing materials in class. Facilitators must first study these materials and design activities based on them. After instruction, the learners could start their exercise in small groups which allow them to have discussions on what they are doing. In this situation, learners could rely on the facilitator as a source of support with regard to language skills.

Facilitators must also inform learners that the success of the course is determined by the willingness of learners to be totally involved. Learners must accept the fact that the facilitator cannot help in the area of expertise and that the facilitator only provides expertise in text analysis and pedagogy to enable him to select and structure the trajectory of his own learning based on his perception of the disciplinary/ professional culture from which he comes. This being so it is highly recommended that learners bring their own corpus or projects as materials to work on because learning becomes more meaningful when the writing — reports, memos and proposals —are read by their supervisors at work.

At each stage of learning, it is important for the facilitator to monitor the progress of learners through questions and answers, assignments and discussions It is necessary for a facilitator to

adopt or establish appropriate monitoring techniques which could help make the course a meaningful and beneficial experience for the learners.

It is equally important for a facilitator to provide feedback to the learners on their performance at the end of each major task. Positive feedback could act as a motivating factor for learners whose level of confidence could be low at the beginning of the course. According to a study conducted by Anson and Forsberg(1990) on a group of interns struggling to write well in the company they interned with, " .. it is revealing that, of our interns... the two who had supervisors willing to act as mentors. . made easier adjustments than did interns who had less communicative supervisors"; the former ended up with greater self-confidence in their writing ability

Finally, the facilitator has an extremely important role in helping the learner to evaluate his work and possibly also his learning techniques. Periodic corrections of samples of written work could be extremely useful for learners as there are improvements that a learner would not be able to make on his own. In addition, by writing comments on their work, facilitator will give learners the opportunity to train themselves to correct their own work. Training in self-monitoring is an invaluable skill for learners will have to monitor their own work once they are on their own.

CONCLUSION

The proposals above are a modified version of the traditional roles of teachers. Although the professional writing class facilitator may not be seen as the source of information in terms of expert business knowledge, he does have a number of very important functions and many more could undoubtedly be added to the few that I have outlined.

According to Holec (1980) as quoted by Blue in his article "Self-Directed Learning Systems and the Role of the Teacher".

" the teacher will find his role become more varied rather than curtailed, strengthened rather than weakened and much greater demands will be made on his creativity than on his highly developed knowledge of teaching technique. "

(Blue 1981)

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