

Research in Practice Projects

From Concrete to Abstract: The Benefits of Using a Guided Reflective Writing Technique with Adult Literacy Students

Leonne Beebe



RiPAL-BC

Research in Practice in Adult Literacy
British Columbia

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From Concrete to Abstract: The Benefits of Using a Guided Reflective Writing Technique with Adult Literacy Students is one in a series of reports resulting from Research in Practice Projects (RiPP), a RiPAL-BC project. RiPAL-BC is a grass roots network of individuals and organizations committed to research in practice in adult literacy in British Columbia, Canada.

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Preface

Research-in-Practice Projects (RiPP) started as a way to encourage and support practitioners to engage in research about their practice. College and community practitioners were eager to participate in research activities but seldom had the required resources and energy to write a research proposal for a small individual project. Practitioners explained that their “proposal-writing” energy gets directed to program delivery proposals. RiPP offered an alternative. Building on previous research-in-practice projects carried out in Alberta by The RiPAL Network, RiPP involved five literacy practitioners in research-in-practice projects and provided them with research education opportunities and support.

In the fall of 2003, literacy program coordinators, instructors and others involved in literacy practice were invited to participate in a facilitated meeting to explore possible research topics they might be interested in pursuing. During the following weeks, those who were interested in continuing with the project developed individual research proposals. Throughout the next eighteen months, five practitioners collected data, analysed it and wrote their findings. The group came together several times to discuss the research stages they were navigating and the challenges they were facing. Online discussions allowed the group to stay in touch and maintain the level of support required to make progress in their individual projects.

The process was not without challenges. Writing, especially, became an almost insurmountable hurdle that was hard to make space for in busy professional and personal lives. Practitioner researchers worked for many months; dedicating many more hours than the project had anticipated, to produce research reports that would be rigorous but also speak clearly to the audience they care about most, other practitioners and community members.

In this report, Leonne Beebe explores how a writing activity that involves reflection and evaluation offers opportunities for learners to experience writing about course and personal content and about interactions with other students and with the teacher.

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Thank you to all who have helped me complete my first practitioner research report; in every little and big way, you have been there for me when I needed your help the most. In particular, I especially thank the members of my research team and my family.

When I first heard that learning to do research was an apprenticed skill, I didn't fully understand. Now, however, I have gained a great appreciation for the mentors of apprentices such as I. Without project co-ordinator and research friend, Marina Niks, who gave me the confidence, support and forward pushes when all seemed to want to go backwards instead, I would not have completed this project.

I sincerely appreciated all the support of the members of our research group. Paula Davies and Dee McRae, who already had experience doing research-in-practice projects, were most helpful in listening to me, looking at my writing, and sharing their points of view with me as researchers first and ABE teachers second. How could I think of our meetings in Vancouver and Prince George without remembering the refreshing breeze of community outreach teaching, challenges, humor and laughter coming in from Hazelton with Anne Docherty and Melanie Sondergaard to put my life into perspective? Thank you to Kate Nonesuch, who edited this report from the point of view of a respected practitioner researcher.

I am grateful to each one of my students who volunteered and submitted their written reflections to me for use as my student data. Without their ongoing interest and involvement, there would be no research project.

I am thankful for the dedication of the University College of the Fraser Valley's volunteer peer Research Ethics Board. The thoroughness of their review and the value of their recommendations gave me the sense of credibility as a researcher and validity in my research.

I thank God for the blessing of my husband, Fraser, and our son, Ford, for their ongoing moral support over the past two years while my "research stuff" was in their way beside and on the family computer desk.

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Introduction

As an Adult Basic Education (ABE) practitioner with over 25 years of experience, I share with you my life-long joy of teaching and my curiosity about learning. I have had the opportunity of observing and learning from English upgrading students at the BC Fundamental (approximately grades 5– 8) and Intermediate (approximately grades 9–10) levels. Whether I was teaching students in an on-campus college classroom setting, in an off-campus small community, or in a First Nations outreach setting, I saw similar patterns repeating themselves in my students’ learning process and progress.

Too many times, I have seen too many returning students start with a real hope for success only to struggle, quit and drop out again! When these students reached the point of not understanding, they would get frustrated and worried. Too often, many of these students would tell me that they “just don’t get it,” or that they “hate it,” and once again, their new learning experiences would quickly become negative, a repeat of failure—just like their last or past school experiences were.

What caused these once-motivated and hopeful students to quit? What were the factors involved in the “stay or quit” decision? I started to ask myself questions about my students’ past learning experiences. What did they know about how they learned? Did they know how to apply this knowledge to their personal learning and study process? Did they know what they needed to do to become successful learners? Helping my students learn how to be successful this time at school was critical for keeping them in the program and continuing with their learning. I needed an intervention to stop my students from dropping out of my courses.

This quest for an intervention activity came with me in 1998 when I returned to teaching ABE. In addition to what I perceived as a lack of self-confidence in their learning processes, many of my students also seemed to have developed a lack of confidence in their writing skills. I have seen too many of them struggle and fail to complete the creative process of “mental thought” to “mental word-thought” to “written word-thought.” Although my students appeared to have little difficulty in the “mental thought” to “mental word-thought” to “spoken word-thought” process in class discussions and conversations, writing content about themselves and their personal experiences seemed much more difficult and stressful, and much less successful.

In 2003 I attended the annual provincial conference of the Adult Basic Education Association of BC at Kwantlen University College in Richmond, BC, and heard Dr. Rita Smilkstein, the keynote speaker, present her brain-based “Natural Human Learning Process” model. She teaches her students about their learning process

and how to evaluate their learning progress themselves. When she discussed the role of meta-cognition, “thinking about thinking and learning about learning,” and writing reflections about thinking and learning, I had found the answer to my dual-purpose intervention activity. After her presentation, I just had to “mingle and maneuver” myself up to the front of the line to buy her newly published book, *We’re Born to Learn* (2003). If my students were taught about how they learned and what they needed to do to become successful learners, would it be possible for them to break free from their past failure-filled learning cycle?

I designed, developed, and taught the Guided Reflective Writing Technique (GRWT), an intervention writing activity which I used at the end of every class session with my students. Then I analyzed the students’ GRWT data and my own reflection notes to answer my research question: “How effective is the Guided Reflective Writing Technique as an intervention tool generating successful student learning experiences and successful student writing with personal content for ABE students and for their teacher?”

Literature Review

Rita Smilkstein (2003) argues that when you teach your students how their brain learns, they will know what they need to do to become successful learners.

Human beings have an innate learning process, which includes a natural motivation to learn. Outside school, students constantly engage in learning, teaching themselves and each other to be, among other things, electronic and computer masters, popular culture savants, streetwise survivors, sport experts—and they do this complex learning with attentiveness, determination, and perseverance (p. 29).

Smilkstein’s work offers an opportunity for teachers of ABE students who have already failed at in-school learning and yet have been very successful at out-of-school learning. Student learning, meta-cognition, self-evaluation and the use of reflective writing can be used as tools to help students learn about their learning process. Writing in journals, for example, allows learners to reflect on their reflections.

The Use of Reflective Journal Writing

The use of reflective writing and reflective journal writing has recently become well documented as a critical component and an effective educational tool for many post-secondary college, university and professional level education programs. The use of reflection and reflective journal writing is most often noted in the professional development of student teachers and student medical practitioners (Ferraro, 2000; Williams and Wessel, 2004; Andrusyszyn and Davie, 1997; and Burrows, 2001).

Joan M. Ferraro (2000) shows that reflection helps both student-teacher and teacher better comprehend their teaching styles and thus helps them become better teachers. If this reflective journal writing technique worked for teachers’ professional development, I suspected that the same result should be possible by using reflective journal writing with my ABE students to help them learn about their learning styles and thus help them become better students.

The use of reflective journal writing with physical therapy students also showed that the teacher was able to receive information about her students’ learning process by helping her students learn to reflect and write about their learning experiences (Williams and Wessel, 2004). The value of reflective journal writing using the on-line mode of teaching students has also been demonstrated for

undergraduate analytical reading and writing students (Pierce, 2001) and for graduate level students in a computer-mediated course (Andrusyszyn and Davie, 1997). A first year level engineering professor believed that by having students write reflective journals, there would be an improvement in student learning. The results proved that not only were the students' thinking and writing skills improved, the learning of the course content was also improved (Burrows, 2001).

The reviewed literature documents the extent of the use and value of written reflections with teaching, medical, and online English and engineering post-secondary courses. The value to these students has been observed as real and tangible.

The Use of Guided Questions to Help Students Learn Reflective Writing

The use of "guided" questions to help students develop reflective skills and to help students learn how to write journals was another focus in the literature. Bryan A. Bardine (1995), for example, points out that in a specific program where the teacher uses questions as an educational tool to help ABE students write journals, the use of these "guided" questions was seen as a beneficial technique for the students' journal writing. However, the content of the journal writing was not reflective in nature.

Jo Painter (1996) describes the benefits of using "the questioning technique" with public school students, whose learning skills levels are more closely related to ABE students' skills levels than are post-secondary students.

Although I was able to find articles about different types of journal writing for ABE students, I was not able to find references that specifically used reflective journal writing in ABE programs.

Reflection and reflective journal writing now have an important and effective role to play in the adult learning process and educational programs at the post-secondary level. Why would this same reflective writing process not have the same importance and effectiveness in the learning process and programs for ABE and literacy upgrading students, including the students in my class?

Methods

To answer my research question I taught the Guided Reflective Writing Technique (GRWT), an intervention writing tool; I used the GRWT at the end of every class session with my students, and I also wrote my own reflections on the sessions. Then at the end of term, I analyzed the students' GRWT data, looking for support of my analysis in my own reflections.

Participants

At the beginning of the research project, a total of 19 students (male and female adults, ages 20 through 60 years) were registered in my UCFV College and Career Prep English upgrading classes. This included 10 Fundamental level students (learning to write sentences and short paragraphs) and nine Intermediate level students (learning to write paragraphs and short five-paragraph essays).

The criteria for student volunteers in the research project were based on the participation in class activities and the completeness of their Guided Reflective Writing section at the end of the term. Students used a binder to keep all their course work, especially their reflective writing, together in their learning log binders.

From the original 10 Fundamental level students, two left for work and two left for employment courses; six students submitted their learning log binders, but only five were accepted as meeting the criteria for data; one learning log binder was submitted by a student who attended regularly, but he did not write reflections, so his binder was not accepted. From the original nine Intermediate level students, one left for work, seven handed in learning log binders that met the data criteria, and one did not hand in a binder. In total, 12 learning log binders were accepted.

Although most of the students signed a Consent to Participate form to have their names used with their words, to ensure the confidentiality of all my students I coded the students as follows: FF = Fundamental Female, FM = Fundamental Male, IF = Intermediate Female, and IM = Intermediate Male.

Data Collection

Students participated in activities designed to teach them about the learning

process, the studying process and the group process. Each of the students wrote answers of various length to the guided reflection questions that I wrote on the board at the end of each class (usually twice a week). Students would hand in their reflections at the beginning of the next class, and I would return their writings the following class to be filed in their learning log binders.

Students were asked to write as much as they could and at least three sentences for each question. Some Fundamental level students struggled, but most were writing about a page of answers by the end of the class. The Intermediate level students were asked to write as much as they could, and most wrote two to three pages of answers by the end of term.

This Guided Reflective Writing became their out-of-class “learning about learning” activity, and their reflective writing assignment became the basis and core of their individual writing program.

Students handed in their writing assignment to me at the beginning of the following class. After I had read their content, commented on their content, and corrected the sentence construction, I returned their reflective writings to the students, so they could review my content comments and construction corrections. After the review, the students filed their Guided Reflective Writing in the Self-Reflection Section of their learning log binders.

After the end of the term, students handed in their learning logs, and I used their Guided Reflection Writing Section for my student data. The teacher’s data was the collection of my after-class reflections.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed and coded. The different needs the GRWT was addressing became the main themes of the analysis and later of the writing. The GRWT as an Educational Tool for the students, and for the teacher, was the first theme to emerge. Further analysis resulted in the student data being coded specifically for comments about learning and how the tool helps students integrate the course content into in-class and out-of-class learning experiences, into reflective writing assignments, and how it helps students to evaluate their learning of the course content and the learning activities. The teacher’s data contained important references to how the tool facilitated the work of the instructor and the integration of the course content into a course writing assignment that would

help the students to relate the course content to their in-class learning experience and to relate the course concepts to out-of-class life experiences. Throughout the data, students and teacher reflected on the social factor involved in building the learning/teaching relationship. These themes became the structure of my analysis and data writing.

Ethics

Since I was working in a public post-secondary institution that has in place an ethical approval process, I applied to the Research Ethics Board. I was given permission to work with my students only with the understanding that students would not sign the Student’s Consent Form until after the course marks were submitted at the end of term. This would ensure that the students did not feel obliged, coerced or manipulated to participate.

I presented my research project to the students early in the term; to ensure that my students understood that their involvement would be by choice, after their course marks were submitted at the end of the term, a colleague attended my initial research project presentation. The students knew that they would have to participate in the regular class activities and keep an up-to-date Self-Reflections Section (Guided Reflective Writing – GRW) in their learning log binder to be able to participate in my research project.

After their course marks were submitted at the end of the term in May, students were invited to sign the Ethics-Board-approved Student Consent Form and submit their learning log binders to be used for data. To have their learning logs accepted as data, students had to have attended regularly, and written most of the reflections (GRW), which was the intervention activity. Students also needed to have written the class, monthly and final test reflections, and reflections on their term’s reflections.

Going through the Research Ethics Review Board (REB) process gave credibility to my role as a valid and ethical researcher. Receiving permission to conduct my research project gave me the sense of being accepted as a peer and real researcher. This was a mutually beneficial process. I was able to introduce the role of practitioner as researcher to the REB, as my project was the first practitioner-research project submitted to and passed by the UCFV REB; they were very interested in this type of research. My REB was able to introduce me to the role of Research Ethics Boards in ensuring the ethical treatment of my students. It was very useful and helpful for me.

Practitioner Research: Integrating the Best of Both Roles

As the practitioner, I was able to integrate the research reflection questions into the regular content of the course as writing assignments. This is a benefit for the practitioner-researcher in that the regular class students and activities can be used without having to make major changes to the curriculum or teaching schedule.

My students were involved with me in the research project as their written reflections were an integral part of the data. Student input was requested in revising the activities, which also helped the students to feel involved. As the researcher, I was able to read their reflections for a different purpose, which gave me a unique insight into my students’ learning that I didn’t have before as the practitioner.

Presenting my research project to my students allowed a unique opportunity to present the concept of practitioner-research in a very practical understandable way. The students became my research assistants in collecting and organizing the student data.

The GRWT as an Effective Educational Tool in the ABE Classroom

In this section I will show how the Guided Reflective Writing Technique (GRWT) proved to be an effective educational tool, generating a space for students’ reflections on their experiences and for the teacher to read and comment on those reflections. Thus, the GRWT facilitated learning and teaching in the English class.

The GRWT as a Learning Tool

As a learning tool, the GRWT offered the students a learning strategy that guided and supported their thinking process. The main process used in achieving this goal was self-evaluation. By evaluating their own learning, the students learned about how they learned—their learning process—and about how they felt about their learning progress—their emotions. By writing answers to these reflection questions, the students were guided to focus on, think, and relate to their personal experiences in each class.

Self-Evaluation of Student Learning Process

I wanted my students to become aware of how they were learning by answering questions about their personal learning process with each class learning activity. By reflecting and writing their reflections, they had to become more aware of their learning process.

The Fundamental level students were challenged especially because they had not had much, if any, opportunity to evaluate their own learning process and progress before. They expected that the teacher would do this evaluation as they thought this was the teacher’s job, and she should “have to do all the work.” The GRWT provided a familiar format that allowed students to evaluate and compare their past and present learning experiences.

The following quotation comes from a student who already knew that he was ready to move to the next course. He only needed me to confirm what he already knew about his term’s progress. Again, he was telling me what he had learned about his own learning. He had gained the self-confidence to move on to the next level from his self-evaluation reflections. It was not because I told him that he was ready; it was because he told me that he was ready to move up to the next level that he moved:

I felt very good about my learning success this term. I came to school this term not knowing what to expect, now I have the skills to continue to the

next level. It (group skills) benefits everyone in class and myself as well in the learning process. I have gotten the skills that I needed to go on to the next level or course. I feel very good about my study skills. Learning the studying process has helped me to study for self-evaluation tests and monthly tests (FM, May 5).

The use of the GRWT allowed the students to reflect on and record their learning process. By evaluating her own speaking and writing skills, this student was able to explain why she felt the way she did about her learning. Her progress was noticeable to her because she had found and named her own signs of improvement; then, she told her teacher:

I feel that I have improved my speaking and writing skills because I can talk to people without hesitating, and my writing skills get better and better every time I write (FF, Mar 31).

By the end of term, the GRWT had facilitated a process that enabled this student to reflect and write about her learning style and her problems in public school, along with a suggestion to improve the system for students with learning difficulties like her:

I was mismatched (with the teacher's teaching style). I found my problem with learning was that because a teacher may know it all, she taught like we would already know. Therefore she would speed through. When a teacher would "push" the work through, I would get all frustrated and gave up on trying. What the educational system needs are teachers that can pin-point problems and help clarify, so those with troubles can continue (FF, Apr 26).

This concept of self-evaluation seemed clearer and more articulate in the Intermediate Level students than in the Fundamental Level students' writing because they could better express their reflections in writing. They also had more experience with their own learning process. For example:

My writing has improved so much since the last semester. I get my homework and assignments done for when they are due. Also, I have many characteristics of being a successful student. I'm always present. I've moved, I haven't been feeling all that great for the last few days, but I always come to classes. I just can't stand to miss anything (IF, Apr 4).

This GRWT supported and provided an opportunity for the following student who had no past experience with writing any more than a few sentences at a time.

Reflecting about his learning process and progress was a motivator for him. He was able to see his own improvement in his writing skills as well as giving his own examples of his improvement:

I think my writing skill has improved the most. I've been trying to write more and more each time. Except some of my spelling is wrong like when I use the words "there", "their", and "they're"; I get mixed up. My example is that I used to write one page for my journal; now I am writing two pages...The most important thing that I learned about learning this month is that I finish my homework; and now I am studying more. And why? Because I want to finish this semester off with a good mark. And I want to come next semester to really learn how to write (IM, Apr 1).

Writing reflective self-evaluations acted as a motivator for many students as they could sense their own self-confidence improving. This student's written reflections show that she has gained an ongoing sense of self-improvement and accomplishment in her large group speaking skills. She was gaining self-confidence in reading her writing to the class because she now felt accepted and comfortable with the other students. A sense of self-determination comes through her reflection as if she is talking herself into learning success:

I felt a bit nervous, but I was trying to think positive and concentrate on what I was going to read. What helped me was trying to focus on what my writing was about and how it sounded. Once it was my turn to get up there in front of the class, I would be OK because I was comfortable with my classmates (IF, Mar 17).

The GRWT's end-of-month reflections offered the students the opportunity to compare their beginning base level skills with the end-of-month present skills. This student's writing reflects the growth of a once shy student into a self-confident student who can accurately determine what is causing her skill improvement:

My study process was very successful. I felt very good about my mark on my test today. I am very satisfied with my study process because I got a very good mark (100%) on my test and I was very confident that I would do good today on my test (IF, Apr 4).

The GRWT provided a familiar format for the end-of-term reflections. This student, while re-reading and re-reflecting on her collection of term reflections, could see and sense her learning success. She started the term as a shy student.

This was documented in her writing:

Sharing in a circle with a crowd of people makes me very nervous. I'm not usually a shy person but I am when it comes to talking in front of a crowd, when I am not sure on what I am saying is I'm suppose to be saying (IF, Jan 13).

By the end of term she wrote about her improvement, along with some advice for others:

The most valuable thing that I learned about learning this term is that I can do anything I set my mind to and I won't ever let anyone tell me any different. Don't be afraid—just jump right in and do what you set out to do... I feel that my learning success this term was good, because I really learned a lot of things that I don't remember learning in high school. I feel that my group skills improved very much from when I first got to the classroom because I was very shy when I first started...

I feel that my study skills are very good because I followed all the study techniques that you have taught me this term that has made me to be a good studier. I feel that my listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are very good... (IF, Apr 6).

The GRWT offered the ABE students an opportunity to integrate their self-evaluation of their in-class learning experience with the course content into their writing assignment, thus assisting with the learning of the course content. The GRWT also allowed the students to focus and relate the learning of a course content concept to a personal experience involving a learning situation. This personal relationship makes the classroom learning relevant to the student. As well, it integrates this course content into a personal narrative paragraph format.

Self-Evaluation of Emotions

Reflective writing also allowed students to write and reflect on their emotions about learning. These Fundamental level students are now able to express that they like learning and are excited and anticipating future learning:

I am glad to be back in school, and I also feel good about what I have learned because I normally keep to myself, but in this class we do group activities...(FF, Mar 1).

I like it (learning how the brain learns) because there are things that I know I can figure out about myself and my learning. I'm excited about learning new

things now I know that I can learn. So far, I learned that my brain can learn. It may take longer and hard work, but it can be done. I can't wait to learn more about spelling (FF, Mar 22).

The most important thing I have learned about me this month is that I love to learn and read with others my age and older because I like to socialize with people and learn right alongside them (FF, Mar 31).

When students were able to reflect about how they felt about their learning, they expressed their enjoyment of learning and anticipation of future learning. These Intermediate level students' reflections point out that the students are enjoying their learning process:

The activity of the survey was very enjoyable, certainly not boring (IF, Jan 20).

Enjoyment in learning in groups...yes, I do very much like working in groups. I thoroughly enjoy it (IF, Feb 3).

I just love coming to school now that I am at school. At first I felt really nervous and shy but I was really ready to get right in there and do some work, so I could pass my English course (IF, Mar 2).

I am enjoying learning and I think that if I keep feeling positive, I will keep on succeeding (IF, May 3).

The GRWT as a Teaching Tool

In addition to its many benefits as a learning tool for the ABE students, the GRWT also gives the ABE teacher a teaching tool to relate the course content directly to the students' class experience by providing the on-going opportunity and challenge for the teacher to reflect and pull out the most important relevant course content:

Preparing the spontaneous reflection questions near the end of each class made me focus and reflect on what had happened during each class and what I thought was the most important content, activity, or process for the students' reflections and written responses (Teacher's Reflections, Feb 4).

While thinking about and writing answers to these guided reflection questions,

students became more focused on their learning process and on the course content:

Reading the students’ reflections gave me new insights into their learning process and progress. Writing comments about each student’s reflections allowed me to establish an on-going one-to-one personal conversation with each student about his/her learning process and progress (Teacher’s Reflection, Feb 4).

Also, I was able to get a sense of where the class as a whole was and where each student as an individual was in terms of understanding and learning the concepts and content of each lesson. This helped me in planning and preparing for my next class (Teacher’s Reflection, Feb 6).

The GRWT as a Relationship-Building Tool

The GRWT offered a relationship-building tool to both students and teacher where students shared their individual written reflections with their teacher in a non-threatening, non-judgemental way because the reflections were based on, and related to, the course content. This opportunity resulted in the building of a motivating and mutually beneficial learning/teaching relationship between each student and the teacher:

I perceived in both myself and in my students that a subtle yet significant power shift was happening. Class lessons and activities became much more student-centered and much less teacher-centered as the students reflected individually on their own progress (Teacher’s Reflection, Feb. 6).

Based on my experience teaching this writing level, I have learned that it is critical for me as the ABE teacher to provide a supportive writing environment that establishes and promotes non-judgement and acceptance between the teacher as reader and the students as writer. This teaching/learning environment is especially important for students to start using personal content while developing their writing skills. This is especially so if the teacher expects the students to use personal content to write reflections about “What I think... What I feel... and What I learned...” after each class. The teacher also needs to model this visual/aural behavior of non-judgmental acceptance of all students at all times because the students notice even when the teacher thinks it’s not visible. It is just as important to be non-judgemental and accepting of the students’ written content.

Soon after the term had started and I started using the GRWT to help students reflect and write about their learning process, a student wrote that she was now more able to join in class activities this year because of this “class comfort zone”:

Reflecting back to last semester compared to now, I have really gotten comfortable with everyone and really enjoy the whole participation that we get in class. I never really thought about it before, but when you mentioned the whole thing about trusting your classmates, I guess that’s why I’m more comfortable because no one is going to mock anyone or center them out (IF, Jan 20).

Within this safe supportive environment and the teaching/learning relationship, the students started telling me about how they felt about themselves, the course content, and me! One student wrote about all three:

The Learner’s Log I think is a very good idea. As far as the organization goes, I’m pretty confused and unorganized up to this point. But I know that you (teacher) will be helping us get that problem solved soon (IF, Feb 3).

Again, another student similarly wrote, “Today seemed easier to organize my learning log. I don’t know if it’s because you helped me last class, or I know what I’m to look for” (FF, Feb 4).

This ongoing, interactive GRWT process allowed the students to have a “conversation with the teacher out-of-class” about what they “thought, felt and learned” from their class experiences. It also allowed the teacher to “listen” by reading the students’ reflections, and to “talk” by writing comments about the reflective personal content with each student about his/her class experience. This ongoing written conversation encouraged the students and the teacher to initiate and build this progressive positive teaching/learning relationship:

Reading the students’ guided written reflections has given me information and insights about their learning processes that I did not have access to before I started using the GRWT (Teacher’s Reflection, Feb. 6).

For example, one student expressed difficulty with writing reflections when she shared, “I feel that I getting more and more adapted to doing the work, but I am having a hard time writing a reflect. My mind is a bit blank at the moment” (IF, Jan 23).

Another student shared how she felt about reading her writing out loud in class.

After being with me already for one term before, this student who had started with only very basic reading and writing skills, shared in her written reflection that she had just learned something new about her reading problems: "This morning, in reading, I found out that I read for reading, but I don't understand what I was reading" (FF, Jan 19).

Later in the term after we had studied about how the brain learns, she wrote: "There are many things that I don't know about my brain. Like why I have problems understanding words where others have no problems" (FF, Mar 3). Without having had the ongoing opportunity to read her reflections, I would not have known the reason why she preferred sitting down to read when given the choice:

I feel okay reading in class about my writing. It's the standing that makes me nervous. If I sit and read, things go good for me. Maybe it's because of my size that makes me uncomfortable (FF, Mar 10).

At the beginning of this term, all students were asked if they would like to be helped with pronouncing words while they were reading out loud to the class. All agreed to let others help them, but for one particular student, after some time, this had become a problem that she felt she needed to write about to me. She shared her problems with reading, sounding out and pronouncing words. The way some students were helping her to say the words, in fact, wasn't helping her at all. Not only did she feel frustrated, she felt she was being helped in a way that made her feel put down:

I don't mind when someone corrects me but they first have to give me a chance to sound out the words. It bothers me when they tell me the word because they did not give me a chance to learn the words and the same with speaking. If I say something wrong, I don't mind if they tell me the correct way, but don't put me down when they are correcting my words (FF, April 7).

Similarly, after a class discussion about listening blocks and how emotional buttons can affect our listening skills, I gained many insights about my students from their written reflections for that class. An older female student wrote about an emotional button that can still make her feel vulnerable and reactive:

The only "emotional button" pushed for me was when the teacher mentioned and wrote down "sexual abuse" (as a button for some women). Those words are still difficult for me to hear or see written down. This put me in a very emotional state for the afternoon. This may seem extreme, but that is my reaction now (IF, Feb 19).

Another older female student, who had previously written:

I think that listening is easier for me because I am a very shy person. Also, I don't like talking in front of people. I would rather watch other students speak until I feel comfortable enough to speak in front of people (IF, Feb 19).

also wrote about her "emotional buttons":

My emotional button that was pressed today was when ... (another student) said that I have to be the next reporter, and I might not feel comfortable enough to do it. I feel like I almost could, but then again, think I can't because the class might judge me or I might not sound right or make any sense. One of my other emotional buttons is when people call me fat; that really pushes my buttons (IF, Feb 19).

Students also liked to write about their opinions and complaints about other students' behavior. One student wrote her opinion of group work and her progress as she did more group work. She had struggled with group work because she was last in school in the early 60s where there was only the teacher-directed individual class work done. Although she was the most advanced student in writing, she struggled with the "social factor" needed for group work speaking or listening. By reflecting on her own learning process, she was able to see her own improvement and share it with me:

Personally, I do not like to work in groups. I like to depend upon myself to prepare assignments...I was a little apprehensive about working with other students. Our group working together was organized and very informative... We were able to see how each of us had followed a process in choosing or learning our favorite hobbies...I now like the sharing of our lists. I feel today's list of listening blocks was more interesting than other days. I feel it is because I work well in my group (IF, Feb 10).

Later, when the group activity involved the group study process, she again struggled with this group process social factor because she was used to only studying as an individual:

My personal opinion is that it is necessary to do group study because of the social factor. My preference is to study in pairs as it seems less confusing. We all have different personalities, such as I myself seem to blurt out questions in class. Another student may cough continually, so we have to be aware of each others personality traits. Everyone should try to help others in the class and

not confuse each other. I learned that being part of a group can be confusing if there is no respect (IF, Mar 30).

She continued her ongoing reflection about group work by saying, "I learned that working in the group process could be useful if everyone is prepared to work. Now I know that being alone can be boring and ideas from other students broaden your material" (IF, March 30).

The GRWT offered both the ABE students and the ABE teacher the opportunity to initiate and develop an ongoing, out-of-the-class written conversation that enhanced the ongoing in-class verbal conversations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I set out to study how effective the Guided Reflective Writing Technique is as an educational tool for ABE students and for their teacher. I learned that the GRWT facilitates learning for the students and teaching for the teacher. The GRWT provides an opportunity for the guidance, support, and motivation students need to reflect and write about their learning process based on their personal in-class learning experiences. The GRWT offers the students the opportunity of continual writing practice to integrate their personal content into their reflective writing assignments.

The GRWT offers the opportunity for the teacher to make the course content relevant for the students by integrating the course content/concepts into the students' in- and out-of-class experience through the design of the guided reflective writing assignments. The GRWT also offers an opportunity for initiating and building a mutually beneficial learning/teaching out-of-class writing relationship between the ABE students and their teacher.

Having shown the value and benefits of the GRWT as a practical and effective educational tool, I recommend that further practitioner research be conducted to explore the use of the GRWT with Fundamental and Intermediate level ABE English students:

- (1) in providing an ongoing design and format for increasing the amount of writing content and for improving the correctness of sentence construction;
- (2) in providing an ongoing design and format for student self-evaluation of learning process and progress and using the students' final self-evaluation as a factor in the final course grade;
- (3) in providing an ongoing design and format for the development of the social factor in the learning/teaching relationship between student and teacher.

I also recommend that research involving the GRWT be conducted:

- (4) with higher level ABE English classes; and,
- (5) with other ABE subject areas such as math and computers where students could also be given guided reflection questions based on their learning process and progress with learning the course content.

From Practitioner to Researcher

Now, having just finished my first practitioner research project, this process has reinforced my positive attitude about the value of my practitioner skills and course content activity development because my research data analysis confirms externally what my practitioner instincts told me internally.

Having to apply and be approved by UCFV’s Research Ethical Review Committee, I learned that my research was validated, supported, and gained credibility for its value and quality within my institution. I also felt more credible as a researcher within myself and within the Research in Practice Adult Literacy British Columbia (RiPAL BC) field.

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APPENDIX A:

Examples of the Guided Ref ection Questions

February 3

1. What do you **think** about doing the group brainstorm process to develop content?
2. How did you **feel** about working in the small group and sharing in your content?
3. How do you **feel** about using/organizing your Learner’s Log?

February 5

1. What do you **think** about Leonne’s research project?
2. What did you **learn** about “Sharing Our Words”?
3. How do you **feel** about sharing your own personal words and presenting in public?

February 10

1. What do you **think** about “the reason/fact/action plan” discussion and how it applies to students?
2. How would **feel** about students who seem to think “reasons” are okay when group work needs to be done?
3. Choose something that we talked about today. What did you **learn** from what we discussed?

February 12

1. What do you **think** about learning about the “learning process”?
2. How do you **feel** about using your Learning Log now?
3. What have you **learned** about “process” (how you do something) and “product” (what you end up with) by going through the activity (individual/ small group/ large group/ report on board) that we did today?

February 17

1. What do you **think** about “six stages of the NHLP? How will knowing these stages help you with understanding your own learning process?
2. How did you **feel** about doing the “Exchanging Content” activity?
3. What did you **learn** about listening and speaking from doing this activity?

February 19

1. What do you **think** is easier—listening or speaking? Why? Give reasons/ examples.
2. How did you **feel** about thinking/sharing your list of Listening Blocks? Did you find any “emotional buttons” being pushed today or in the past? Which ones?
3. How useful was the writing of a paragraph to show you the paragraph form? What did you **learn** from this activity? How will this help you with your own writing process and product?

March 4

1. What do you **think** about learning more about your brain? Why?
2. How do you **feel** about learning more information about your brain? Why?
3. What did you **learn** from the two activities that we did this class?

March 9

1. What do you **think** about reading your writing out loud to the class? Why?
2. How do you **feel** about reading your writing out loud to the class? Why?
3. What have you **learned** about your public listening and public speaking/ reading skills?

March 16

1. What do you **think** about the “Ladder of Success” model using base and ceiling levels? Is it helpful? Why?
2. How did you **feel** when you shared your writing with the class? Why? What has helped you to read in front of the class?
3. What did you **learn** about public speaking and the “Ladder of Success” today? How did this help you understand your own process and progress?

March 16

1. What do you **think** about using Koosh balls and the “name game” to help you learn about learning? Why?
 2. How did you **feel** while doing the “name game”? Why?
 3. What did you **learn** about the “Ladder of Success” by playing the “Name Game”?
- base level / ceiling level (goal); time practice, studying, 6 stages of NHLP; 6 innate learning resources of the brain; learning a new activity; choose sentences or paragraphs.

March 23

1. What do you **think** about learning about how your brain learns physiologically (dendrites, neural network, time, practice)? How will knowing this help us become a better learner? Why?
2. How did you **feel** about “learning about learning” by using Koosh balls and playing “name game”? Why?
3. What did you **learn** about learning and group process? (Think about how the group played the “name game.”)

March 23

1. What do you **think** about learning the “Five Rules of how the brain learns”? How will knowing these five rules affect how you learn and study now?

- 2. How do you **feel** about learning about how your brain learns? How will this affect how you feel about learning new things?
- 3. What have you **learned** about the brain and learning?

March 30

- 1. What do you **think** about “the study review process” that we used today? Why? How would you improve it?
- 2. How did you **feel** about studying with the class and with a study partner? Why?
- 3. What did you **learn** about studying from today’s study process? How will this “new” learning help you to study in the future?
- 4. What did you **learn** about group process and being part of a group today?

March 31

- 1. What do you **think** about the “flight or fight”?
- 2. How do you usually **feel** before and during a test? How can you use the “fight or flight” response to change your feelings?
- 3. What did you **learn** about learning and emotions today? How will knowing this affect your learning success?

APPENDIX B: Learning about Learning Intervention

Activities

A set of activities were designed using Dr. Rita Smilkstein’s book, We’re Born to Learn (2003), as a model and reference. A “So ...?” question started each activity. Students provided individual to small group to large group responses; then, information was presented to explain each activity. After each activity, a set of guided reflection questions asked, “What did you think, feel and learn from the activity?”

- 1. **So, what is the difference between your Learning Log and your Class Journal?** The Learning Log is in-class content and the journal is out-of-class content.
- 2. **So, what are the characteristics of a successful student?** Using your Learning Log for self-organization, self-evaluation and self-reflection.
- 3. **So, how do you study?** The Study Process—using the study table and self evaluation test, active and passive studying, individual, partner and group studying.
- 4. **So, how do you learn?** The Six Stages of the Natural Human Learning Process.
- 5. **So, what do you know about your brain?** The Six Innate Learning Resources of the Brain; The Five Rules of How the Brain Learns.
- 6. **So, how do you learn a new skill?** The Name Game—Learning about Learning a New Skill—group activity used to demonstrate learning, neurons and neural networks.
- 7. **So, how does your brain work when it’s learning?** Drawing and learning the physiology of the brain neuron and neural network—dendrites, body, axons, neurotransmitters, synapses, neural networks, using the Name Game as a model.
- 8. **So, how do you know when you have learned something?** The Ladder of Success—base level/what you already know; time and practice—study/time needed for dendrites and neural networks to grow; ceiling level/goal.
- 9. **So, how do you know when you have made a mistake and corrected the mistake?** Learning from your mistakes. The Four Stages of Learning from your Mistakes.

10. **So, what do you do when you don't get something done?** Reasons, Facts and Action Plans.

11. **So, what do you do when you are scared?** Think of a time you were scared. The Fight or Flight Response and The S.T.O.P. Response (Start Thinking Only Positive).

12. **So, how do you like to receive information?** Learning Styles—Sequential (step by step/part to whole) or Visual Spatial (see the whole picture first to see where each step fits in/ whole to part to whole), and Use of Space—vertical or horizontal.