

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Theories of attitudes were integrated with theories about writing to develop a model of students' attitudes to writing. A questionnaire based on this model was devised and trial tested. Results of analyses emphasized the importance of audience as a factor in influencing student attitudes. A comprehensive yet relatively simple measure was produced, based on a modified but grounded theory.

Introduction

The burgeoning interest in writing education over recent years has highlighted the need to clarify our understanding of the factors which affect the writing process, and hence the written product. One of these factors is a student's attitude to writing. Teachers recognize this when they try to find topics which are relevant, interesting and enjoyable for their students. Assessment of students' attitudes has traditionally been conducted through informal, subjective means and has been reported anecdotally. While such an approach has the advantage of being quick and simple for teachers, it may in fact disadvantage students. It is not easy for anyone to dissociate themselves from their own values and attitudes when assessing those of others. What seems enjoyable and valuable to a teacher may be viewed quite differently by students, being at a different stage of development of their writing abilities.

This study aimed to (i) investigate the nature of students' attitudes to writing, and (ii) develop a comprehensive but efficient instrument to measure such attitudes.

Writing Theories

Of the many language theorists who have become interested in the development of written language and writing abilities, Moffett has been particularly influential. He describes writing along a dimension of what he calls 'authoring', by which he means 'authentic expression of an individual's own ideas, original in the sense that he has synthesized them for himself' (1979:278). He defined writing in terms of a hierarchy, from handwriting to transcription, copying, paraphrasing, crafting and finally to full authoring - 'revising inner speech'. This hierarchy did not necessarily follow the chronological path of the development of writing abilities but rather gave a series of increasingly complex descriptions of writing.

Since attitudes to writing may depend on the amount of effort required to fulfil the demands of a particular writing task, this conceptualization in terms of complexity seemed to offer a useful basis for the categorization of the range of writing tasks which may be required of students in the classroom. For the purposes of the study, then:

Technical Tasks are those concerned with the technical and mechanical aspects of writing, including handwriting, spelling and grammar;

Translational Tasks are concerned with the translation of information, including copying, taking or making simple notes or summaries;

Interpretational Tasks need higher intellectual skills of interpretation, understanding, analysis and synthesis; and

Creative Tasks are those which express the writer's own original thoughts rather than being a reflection of other people's ideas and opinions.

Moffett's orientation in this conceptualization is from the point of view of the writer and the written text; but when considering the factors which may affect someone's attitude to writing, the reader and the interaction between reader and writer should not be overlooked. Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen (1975), owing much to the work of Moffett, considered writing not only according to type or mode, but also according to the audience of the writing. Wilkinson (1980) also acknowledges the importance of the reader in his model of writing. When investigating the audience dimension in the classroom context, Britton *et al* found that most student writing is directed toward the teacher, either as teacher-as-examiner or in the form of a teacher-learner dialogue. In either case, the teacher is acting as an evaluator of student work in the sense of making decisions about the student based on information contained in the writing. In this study, three forms of assessment/evaluation were considered:

Technical Evaluation is concerned with the correction of the mechanics of writing, of spelling, grammar and syntax, using publicly accepted criteria;

Judgmental Evaluation involves the teacher's judgment of style, value and worth of student writing, based on criteria established by cultural tradition; and

Reactive Evaluation concentrates on reactions to the ideas contained in writing, using criteria which refer to content rather than form.

In building up a model of student attitudes to writing then, three dimensions of writing were considered. These were the general concept of writing as one of the forms of human communication, the generation of writing through different tasks, and the reception of writing through different evaluation approaches.

Attitude Theories

There is a general consensus about several characteristics of attitudes: they are learned through experience rather than being innate; they focus on some object or aspect within an individual's environment; and they are not directly observable but must be inferred from verbal or overt behaviour. Beyond agreement about these points, there are two main approaches to the conceptualization of attitudes which vary in their degree of complexity and their relationship to related psychological constructs such as beliefs and values.

Unidimensional Conceptualizations

Theorists in this school of thought regard attitudes as simply the tendency to react to some psychological object in either positive or negative terms. Thurstone (1932) provides one of the most influential definitions: 'Attitude is the affect for or against a psychological object'. Most attempts at measuring attitudes have used the unidimensional approach (Severy, 1974). Distinctions are made between an individual's beliefs, values, attitudes and behavioural responses (Fishbein, 1967). However, as Rokeach (1968) points out when he discusses the relationships between these concepts: 'Whether or not the preferential response (to an attitude object) will be positive or negative will depend on the relative strength of one's evaluative beliefs and one's positive and negative feelings'. In other words, people may like something which they think is bad or worthless, or dislike something which they regard as being good or valuable. He therefore recommends that 'an accurate prediction of the preferential response therefore requires a separate assessment of affective and evaluative predispositions underlying the responses' (1968:454).

Component Theories

Proponents of these theories maintain that a realistic model of attitudes should reflect their complexity (Krech and Crutchfield, 1948; Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960). As Wagner (1969) puts it, 'an attitude is composed of affective, cognitive and behavioural components that correspond respectively to one's evaluations of, knowledge of, and predisposition to act toward the object of the attitude'. Measurement of attitudes in this setting becomes correspondingly more difficult and complex, since each component must be measured separately.

The conceptualization of attitudes used in this study subscribes to neither of these approaches entirely. In line with a unidimensional approach, an attitude is regarded as a positive or negative reaction, but this reaction is regarded as having at least two components: an affective, emotional aspect and an evaluative, judgmental one.

Existing Instruments

Many research studies share with teachers the tendency to use informal means of assessment of writing attitudes (Bloom, 1979, 1980; Bell and Price, 1980; Craven, 1980; Freedman, 1980; Southwell, 1980). However, at least three formal instruments do exist. The most widely used is the Daly and Miller Writing Apprehension Scale (1975) whose development is based on a general model of communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970). The Thompson Attitude Survey (1978), like the Daly and Miller scale, focuses on the detection of fear, anxiety and apprehension, making the assumption that these negative attitudes are of more interest to teachers than whatever positive attitudes their students may have. The Emig/King Writing Attitude Scales (1979) take a more neutral stance, asking students to respond to a set of statements concerning their beliefs about writing, feelings and evaluations of writing, and their actions or intentions to act in situations related to writing.

None of these instruments was suitable for the measurement purposes of this study. In the first two cases, the instruments were designed for use with college-level students, whereas our target group was at the upper primary/junior secondary level. Neither the assumed stage of development underlying these scales nor the vocabulary used to express them was therefore appropriate. Use of the Emig/King scales is relatively time-consuming and complex because, since there is no justification for aggregating the responses, each of the 40 items needs to be considered separately.

Model for Student Attitudes to Writing

Rather than relying on general theories of communication or language, the approach taken here was to integrate theories about writing with theories of attitudes to construct a model for student attitudes to writing.

Contribution of Theories of Attitudes

An attitude was regarded as an inferred variable mediating between stimulus and response. Following Rokeach (1968), two aspects of attitudes were distinguished: the affective, concerning an individual's emotional reaction to a particular attitude object; and the evaluative, which depends on an individual's beliefs and values. Thus, an attitude may be positive in one sense and negative in the other. A person may like or enjoy contact with some object whilst at the same time believing it to be wrong, bad or of little value. To gain a comprehensive picture of an attitude, both these aspects should be taken into account.

Contribution of Theories about Writing

Theories about writing yielded a number of dimensions to the set of stimuli which acted as the attitude objects. A total of nine constructs were derived from these dimensions.

Writing in General refers to the abstract conception of writing, divided into enjoyment of writing and value of writing;

Writing Tasks refers to the categorization of classroom tasks based on Moffett's hierarchical definition of writing, divided into the four groups described above; and

Assessment/Evaluation refers to the relationship between students, their writing and teachers, divided into the three approaches described above.

Measuring Students' Attitudes to Writing

Ten items were written for each of the nine constructs of the model, about half being positively worded and half negatively worded. Most were written in the first person in an attempt to elicit personal feelings and opinions rather than generalizations. This pool of

statements was submitted to critical review by a committee at the Australian Council for Educational Research whose expertise covered language, measurement theory and test development. Eighty items were finally chosen for the original version which was trial tested on 248 Year 7 students in a representative selection of Victorian secondary schools. Students were asked whether and to what degree they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements, recording their responses on a four-point scale. They were also encouraged, though not required, to write freely about their attitudes to writing on a blank page provided at the end of the paper.

Data Analyses

Analyses were conducted to explore the latent structure of the pool of items, to test how well the data matched the hypothesized model and also to refine the instrument down to a length which would provide a comprehensive and efficient measure of students' attitudes to writing.

Factor Analyses

Analyses of the whole instrument indicated firstly that most of the items were tapping some general underlying trait, and secondly, that there was evidence to support the three postulated dimensions: *Writing in General*, *Writing Tasks*, and *Approaches to Evaluation*. However, since the ratio of items to cases for the whole instrument was inadequate (Nunnally, 1967; Cattell, 1952), there was a possibility of capitalizing upon chance variation within the data set. For this reason, and also to investigate their structure, analyses were concentrated on each of the dimensions separately.

Since it was assumed that the factors underlying each of the dimensions were correlated, it was more appropriate to use oblique rotation than orthogonal. The number of factors to be rotated was determined by the number of hypothesized constructs within each dimension. The resulting pattern of factors was similar to what had emerged from the previous, more general analyses. In the *Writing in General* dimension, the distinction between the *Enjoy* and *Value* scales was ambiguous. A fairly oblique solution (with the delta parameter set at zero - Kim, 1978), indicated the operation of two separate factors corresponding to the *Enjoy* and *Value* scales. However, the correlation between the factors in this solution was .76, a value which approached the reliabilities of either of the two scales, at which point it ceases to be useful to think of them as separate entities, since either could be used as a reasonable measure of the other. A less oblique solution (with delta set at -0.5), showing only a single factor, was therefore accepted. In the *Writing Tasks* dimension, two clear factors emerged rather than the four hypothesized in the model. The first contained most of the *Technical* and *Translational Task* items, and the second, items from the *Creative Tasks* scale. The *Interpretational Task* items were split between these two groups. Consideration of these two factors seemed to indicate that students tend to categorize tasks according to the major beneficiary of the writing, rather than the degree of complexity involved. The first set of items referred to writing which is directed by and towards a person other than the writer - hence, this factor became known as the 'Writing On Demand' factor. The other set of items had in common reference to writing which is more controlled by the writer, which has some intrinsic benefit for the writer - this was called the 'Writing For Oneself' factor.

In the *Assessment/Evaluation* dimension, the *Reactive* and *Judgmental* scales held together quite well, although this may be a function of the similar wordings of the contributing items. However, items from the *Technical Evaluation* scale were clustered with items which referred to teachers - teachers commenting on ideas, teachers knowing best whether work was good or not. It may be that students automatically associate teachers with the type of evaluation described by the *Technical Evaluation* scale. Certainly, there were comments by the teachers who were interviewed at the time of administration of the instrument which indicated a student feeling that teachers who did not correct grammar and spelling 'simply weren't doing their job'.

Refined Version

The purpose of the analysis was then shifted from investigating the latent structure of the instrument to refining the pool of items. When those having loadings of less than 0.4 were eliminated, forty-eight remained.

Analysis conducted on this set of items adopted a principal axes solution with iterated communalities, and rotation according to Varimax criteria. Kaiser's (1958) rule was used to judge the number of factors to be rotated. Nine factors emerged this time, including a clear *Value* factor. All of the 48 items had loadings of more than 0.3 on at least one of the six major factors, which were designated as a General factor, a Value factor, Writing On Demand, Writing For Oneself, a Judgmental approach to evaluation and a Reactive approach.

The problem was now to decide how many items would be needed to adequately reflect each of these constructs. This was determined by reference to a minimum level of desired reliability, or, in the case of the two Evaluation scales, by whatever number of items maximized the reliability (McKenna, 1970). Table 1 shows the six scales comprising the refined version of the instrument, scale reliabilities, and standard errors of measurement.

Table 1 Refined Version

I	<u>General</u>	n = 9	Cronbach α = 0.91	SEM = 1.9		<u>Loading</u>
	I enjoy writing					.81
	I don't like writing					.73
	I'm sick of writing					.69 *II
	I can't see the point in learning how to write well					.46
	I think that writing is a waste of time					.52
	I think that it's important for me to learn to write well					.46 *II
	I don't find writing to be of much use					.43 *II
	I think that writing is worthwhile					.48
	I like writing					.79
II	<u>Value</u>	n = 3	Cronbach α = 0.83	SEM = 0.9		
	I think that writing is valuable					.59 *I
	Writing is important for me					.61 *I
	Writing is useful for me					.53 *I
III	<u>On Demand</u>	n = 9	Cronbach α = 0.81	SEM = 2.3		
	I think that writing summaries out of textbooks is useful					.51
	I don't like having to describe how things work					.46
	I think that teachers know best whether a piece of writing is good or not					.53
	Writing things out helps me to learn things in all subjects					.54
	I don't like doing grammar exercises					.58 *I
	I think it's good when we write about what's going on in the world					.46
	Writing out spelling exercises is not very helpful to me					.48
	I don't like practising how to use things like verbs and nouns and adjectives					.54
	Writing summaries doesn't help me to learn					.50
IV	<u>For Oneself</u>	n = 9	Cronbach α = 0.81	SEM = 2.0		
	I like describing things in stories					.59
	I enjoy writing stories					.49 *I
	Writing stories is a drag					.34 *I
	I don't like having to write down my ideas					.38 *I,II
	I like being able to write what I think about a particular topic					.48
	I like using my imagination when I write					.41
	I like making up the characters in the stories I write					.63
	I like to express my opinions in writing					.36
V	<u>Judgeval</u>	n = 4	Cronbach α = 0.64	SEM = 1.5		
	I find that just a mark or a short comment on my work doesn't help me to improve my writing					.67
	I find it useful if my teacher gives just a mark or short comment for the writing I hand in					.51
	It's enough for teachers to give just a mark or a short comment for my writing					.52
	I feel annoyed if my teacher returns my writing with just a mark or short comment on it					.39
VI	<u>Reaceval</u>	n = 3	Cronbach α = 0.62	SEM = 1.3		
	I'd like to hear what other people think about what I've written					.60
	I don't think it's useful to discuss what I've written with other people					.62
	I'd like to discuss what I've written with other people					.60

* Shows other significant factor loadings on factors indicated.

Discussion

In relation to writing theories, the importance of the consideration of audience in student conceptions of writing is again emphasized. Rather than being seen in terms of difficulty or complexity, writing tasks are classified according to their intended beneficiary. Attitudes to writing tasks which are done specifically for the teacher, at the teacher's request, are differentiated from attitudes to those tasks from which students feel they can gain some personal benefit.

This distinction may appear clear in the English classroom, but it is just as important in other subjects, though perhaps less obvious. For instance, a student may have a very negative attitude (with all its concomitant consequences) towards writing up experiments in Science, regarding it as a purposeless task done only to please the teacher, pass a course, fill out a blank page, or whatever. Such a negative attitude to the written part of Science may influence other aspects of Science as well, so that the student eventually comes to dislike anything to do with the subject. On the other hand, if the student feels there is some intrinsic benefit to be gained from the writing up of experiments in terms of educational or personal growth, attitudes are more likely to be positive, involvement with the task at hand increase, and learning be more likely to succeed.

The nature of the relationship between writer, text and reader is further elaborated by the results of the analysis on the assessment/evaluation dimension. Most striking is the implied automatic association between teachers and the 'mechanical' correction of writing. It could be that students just tend to perceive the situation this way - whether or not this perception determines positive or negative attitudes was unclear from the analyses. On the other hand, this association could be the reality of the situation - and then teachers must decide whether they think this to be desirable or necessary. Otherwise, there was some evidence to justify a distinction between the traditional type of evaluation which depends on the authority of the teacher to judge the quality of text, and an approach which relies on progressive interaction between teacher and student to agree upon the criteria by which writing should be appraised. And such a distinction carries with it a differentiation of attitudes to writing.

Conclusion

The conception of an attitude as having an affective and an evaluative aspect arose from a consideration of what response might be expected to the question 'What's your attitude to writing?'. The simplest answers corresponding to these two aspects might be 'I don't like it' or 'I think it's good'. Results from this study gave some support for this idea of duality in the conceptualization of attitudes, but certainly more evidence would be needed to maintain the distinction. There was support for the differentiation of student attitudes to writing on at least three dimensions, although the structure of these dimensions was modified.

The resultant instrument produced provides a comprehensive and efficient means of measuring student attitudes to writing in the classroom which is based on a modified but grounded theory. Some further investigations are warranted to develop and confirm the directions indicated by this research.

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