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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study explored the nature of the writing process for graduate students. Research questions were what students' perceptions of the writing process is; whether students think learning to write better has value in their careers; how graduate students learn the writing process; and in what ways a course in writing for publication is valuable in terms of personal and professional growth. Data were collected from eight students in a class on writing for publication using these sources: a survey, interview, writing samples, artifacts from class, and field notes. Preliminary analyses produced these three themes: writing philosophy, defined as the nature of one's understanding of writing; writing process, or knowledge of a series of actions leading to a final product; and understanding writing, defined as the ability to understand one's own writing habits, strengths, and weaknesses. Findings indicated that, while the participants found value and purpose in writing and scholarly writing, they had great difficulty with criticism and using feedback in constructive ways. (29 references) (YLB)

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ED 471 830

Joining the Conversation: Graduate Students' Perceptions of Writing for Publication

Sarah M. Nielsen and Tonette S. Rocco
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: The authors report on their qualitative study of eight students in a class on writing for publication and the nature of the writing process in academia. While the participants found value and purpose in writing and scholarly writing, they had great difficulty with criticism and using feedback in constructive ways.

A distinguished speech communication scholar once commented that an article published in a major journal early in a career could be worth about $25,000 in pay and benefits. A quality article in an important journal can mean a better job, higher pay over a long career with increased retirement and other benefits...In hard cash, the average scholarly publication could be worth about $200 a year for every year you work... (Phillips, 1982, p. 95)

Twenty years later, this statement is just as astounding. Effective writing is an essential skill—now more than ever. The advent of instant worldwide communication has heightened the need for individuals who can access, analyze, and produce clear written communication. Thus, the importance of providing writing instruction in colleges and universities is essential. Writing instruction should train students in the conventions, formats, and the unique rhetorical styles of their disciplines (Jeske, 1985). Requiring students to write papers to a "publishable" standard acquaints students with the scholarly writing process (Shaw, 1999). However, graduate school training rarely includes the specifics of the publication process (Jackson, Nelson, Heggins, Baatz & Schuh, 1999). Many inside and outside of academia lament the quality and substance of writing (Rankin, 1998). Journal editors observe numerous grammatical and structural errors and frequently find a clear thesis absent in manuscripts (Judy, 1982; O'Donnell, 1982).

Few graduate programs teach scholarly writing, and little professional input or support for effective graduate writing exists (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). These doctoral students become faculty members lacking fully developed research and writing skills and the ability to pass on these skills to the next generation of doctoral students (Witt, 1995). The curious shortage of course offerings seems partially to be based on several assumptions and problems. First, academics because of their advanced degrees are assumed to be accomplished writers. (Moxley, 1992). Second, the perception is students receive support for their writing as a by-product of their coursework. Third, simply by being graduate students, they should already know the writing process (Gaillet, 1996; Hernandez, 1985). If not, professors attribute writing flaws to the student rather than institutional deficiencies (Sullivan, 1994). Problems are that non-English educators perceive writing instruction as belonging to the English department rather than across the curriculum. Faculty find their attempts at critiquing and grading writing far too time-consuming to be worth the effort (Loux & Stoddart, 1993; Resnick, 1987). And the same poor writing habits, chronic procrastination and writing apprehension that plague undergraduates are also indicative of graduate students (Bloom, 1981). Additionally, graduate students' lack of knowledge about writing confounds the problem (Berquist, 1983).

In their own scholarly writing class, Caffarella and Barnett (1997) found that of three elements of the writing process--content, process, and critique--the critiquing element was most influential in understanding students' writing process and facilitating a final, publishable product. The limited

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research that exists on the critiquing process and scholarly writing is found in composition and the humanities, reinforcing the notion that writing instruction necessarily be-longs in these disciplines. The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of the writing process for graduate students. These research questions guided our inquiry: (1) What are students' perceptions of the writing process? (2) Do students think learning to write better has value in their careers? (3) How do graduate students learn the writing process? (4) In what ways is a course in writing for publication valuable in terms of personal and professional growth?

Method

On the first day, in the Writing for Publication course at a large urban institution recently rated Carnegie Research Intensive, the co-researchers (a doctoral candidate and instructor) described the study, requesting that students participate. A letter of introduction, a consent form, an outline and timeline of the study were handed out. Questions were answered and eight graduate students agreed to participate by signing the consent form. The data were collected during one school term from multiple sources: a survey, an interview, writing samples, artifacts from class, and field notes. A 21-question survey of students' past and present attitudes about the writing process, field notes, interviews, students' goal charts, and observations were partially completed by seven students. Students answered the survey questions via electronic mail. Interviews were conducted with five students.

We began with the assumptions that (1) students would find writing a valuable skill, and scholarly writing a difficult, time-intensive process; and (2) the manuscript critique would be used constructively and inspire students to produce polished writing. Instruments were developed based on these assumptions. The data supported the former but not the latter assumption. While the participants found value and purpose in writing and scholarly writing, they had great difficulty with criticism and using feedback in constructive ways.

One researcher searched all data sources for themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. We examined the survey and interview data by question, searching for common perceptions and then examining emergent themes. These analyses were compared to ensure consistency. Preliminary analyses produced three themes: (1) writing philosophy, defined as the nature of one's understanding of writing; (2) writing process, or knowledge of a series of actions leading to a final product; and (3) understanding writing, defined as the ability to understand one's own writing habits, strengths, and weaknesses. These three themes are discussed below.

Discussion

Writing Philosophy

Four key points will be discussed: communication, standards, experience, and process.

Communication. Applebee (1984) argued that the permanence of the written word and the explicitness required in effective writing makes writing a powerful vehicle for shaping thought. Writing is a method of communicating ideas and sharing knowledge. As one student asserted, "Writing has enabled mankind to communicate over great distances and [is] a precursor to the rapid spread of knowledge… help[ing] to permanently record historical facts, independent of oral traditions." On a practical level, it allows us to "navigate the society in which we live," as it "allows the author to put out ideas, values and theories to larger groups of people [who] accept or reject these ideas as they see fit." The participants saw writing as a powerful medium for transmission of ideas, allowing knowledge to evolve.

Standards. The permanence of ideas makes the standard for written communication higher. As one student wrote, "Writing is the best mechanism I know to express ourselves in a lasting or

permanent way." For another, the "thought process [involved in writing] takes lots of energy" compared to speaking; in most cases, students' writing and not speaking skills will be evaluated, requiring a higher standard of perseverance and clear articulation of ideas. When students' writing becomes an indisputable record of their ideas, they are more likely to attend to salient features such as clarity, accuracy, and organization.

Experience. Writing is a deeply personal experience, "a pure form of self-expression" and a place where "the imagination runs wild, like a stallion, always seeking new pastures and boldly going where none has ventured before. It is my life, my work, my dreams." Another student noted, "when you write, you are the person who makes things happen; you can do many things that are not possible in real life." Indeed, in graduate courses for publication in education, students experience empowerment (Rippenberger (1998) and create their scholarly identities (Rose & McClafferty, 2001). However, negative reactions to one's writing can cause a person to question his/her ability as a writer and as an academic (Caffarella & Barnett, 1997).

Process. Graduate students viewed their attempts at scholarly writing as learning the methods of academic discourse, or "a conversation with other scholars and before you can join a conversation, you follow protocol." Simple rules like finding a concept, thesis or hypothesis, impact and conclusion were helpful to students. A majority would recommend that others take a class in scholarly writing; one even said it should be a requirement, while another added that two courses should be offered—a foundational and an advanced scholarly writing class.

Writing Process

Three key points are discussed: pre-writing techniques, critiquing, and standards.

Pre-writing techniques. Most participants regularly incorporate pre-writing techniques. One student considers the first three stages of the writing process—prewriting, drafting, and sharing—as "one of the most efficient ways of starting writing." Students used a variety of pre-writing strategies such as outlining, creating graphic organizers, webbing, drawing pictures, and making separate cards with main and supporting ideas. Some plan to incorporate the topic and treatment outlines, which were modeled in the course. Research has shown that these techniques are effective; Walvoord (1995) found that two thirds of college students outline, as it allows for flexibility, recursivity, and discovery of ideas.

Critiquing. The process of editing, proofreading and critiquing is crucial in producing a well-written piece. As one student wrote, "Feedback and critique is very helpful . . . to gather ideas and a wealth of information from the perspective of others." Specific areas students focused on were word choice, clarity, and supporting details. Some admitted weaknesses in these areas. However, all concluded that the process of giving and receiving assistance to polish the writing was essential: "good writing doesn't happen by luck; effort and rewrites seem to be the only guarantee of a quality work product." Caffarella and Barnett (1997), who found that this critiquing step was of most value, concluded that initial apprehension about feedback decreased, though not completely, over time, as self-confidence and growth increased.

Standards. Feedback is essential to ensure writing adheres to a publishable standard. One student wrote, "Through feedback from potential readers, writers discover how well they have communicated their ideas and whether their readers need more information concerning the topic, [thus] producing revision and a sense of ownership." For participants, the ability to give as well as to receive feedback took on new meaning in this class, as they wrote not as students but as scholars, and read not as classmates but as journal editors. One admitted that he "never paid much attention to the process of typing, errors and editing each paragraph or section" until he took the scholarly writing course. Another remarked that giving and getting feedback helps students' future writing abilities: "The opportunity for

rewriting enables the student to internalize the feedback and put it into practice." Figgins and Burbach (1989) also found that one of the most valuable areas of growth was feedback—both giving and receiving.

Understanding Writing

Five areas will be discussed: adaptability, resistance, constraints, mistakes, and anxiety.

Adaptability. Students alter their writing style according to the genre, professor, and/ or subject by paying more attention to grammatical rules for English classes and honoring content for projects in other classes. Experienced writers are aware of the different styles inherent in narrative, imaginary, or informational writing, and adapt their preparation and wording accordingly. Booth (1963) calls this "rhetorical stance" a common attribute of good writers, who focus on the subject, the purpose and the audience of their writing. Flower and Hayes (1981) found that the degree of audience awareness differentiated good from poor writers. Such awareness assists students to adapt to the purpose and style of a specific journal or publisher.

Resistance. Constructive criticism was not taken and used well by these students. Graduate students are unaccustomed to having their work criticized. First, many were not introduced to scholarly writing in their earlier academic lives, which according to Sternberg (1990) is because memorizing and regurgitating information is valued in undergraduate education, whereas discov-ery and judgment skills are prized late in graduate school. Second, those who possess skills im-portant to scholarly writing rarely have the chance to demonstrate them, and may become dis-couraged by not being able to develop their reflective writing skills (Sternberg, 1990). Berquist (1983) concurs that original, scholarly writing is seldom stressed in lower-level courses. This explained the affective comments about criticism. One student explained that many students were sensitive to what they saw as the dissection of their writing. After receiving criticism about the quality of his first draft, one Ivy-league educated student who later dropped admitted, "it hurt quite a bit. But this is the first time someone has pointed it out to me." In defense of those who dropped the class, another student observed, "they go through their entire education getting a stamp of approval, and then suddenly, someone takes it and says it is bad. People thought that there would be acceptance, as this is based on life experience and previous education. [Students saw thc criticism] as a 'diatribe' or 'bitter criticism' " These students questioned whether they needed the course; in his estimation, the student continued, "people will go through considerable lengths to avoid criticism." This experience differs from those reported in other writing for pub-lication classes, where criticism was welcomed and served as a motivator (Rippenberger, 1998).

Constraints. Students had more confidence in their writing ability as undergraduates than as graduate students, partly because of constraints placed on graduate papers. This is due in part to the perception that graduate writing is more difficult; papers begin to become less focused in theme and structure, with less flexibility to create within the confines of courses. Another factor is time constraints on busy graduate students, most of whom juggle the demands of a full-time job, family and social lives with being a student; they had more time to focus on writing earlier in their academic careers. Even those who rated themselves higher as graduate students attributed it to maturity and practice rather than to perceived growth in writing ability. Rippenberger (1998) concurred that graduate students lack confidence in their ability to produce scholarly writing because they believe they must live up to their previous academic success (Bloom, 1981).

Mistakes. The worst writing errors for graduate students are word- and sentence-level errors rather than structural or substantive errors. Students pointed to jargon, colloquialisms, punctuation, grammar, spelling, sentence clarity, and sentence length as the main errors in their writing and the writing of other students. Mentioned less were content-driven errors such as organization, coherence, or

support. This is contrary to the findings of Koncel and Carney (1992), who concluded that students thought their worst problems were the lack of specialized language and format. This does echo what journal editors agree as recurrent problems with manuscripts: the lack of clearly expressed ideas due to ineffective style, poor structure and/or confusing jargon (Binkley, 1982) and the simple need for clarity (Phillips, 1982).

Anxiety. Students tend to procrastinate scholarly or high-stakes writing, suggesting that the more important the writing, the higher the apprehension and anxiety. In interviews, the words "procrastinator" or "procrastinating" were often mentioned with regard to academic or scholarly writing. Furthermore, most students did not meet deadlines for drafts. One said he had no problems making deadlines in other classes, but the reason for his tardiness in the scholarly writing class was "not laziness, but I put things off or procrastinate. [Deadlines] loomed large." This echoes sentiments by Bloom (1981) who found that as a rule, the more important the writing, the greater the apprehension.

Implications for Adult and Higher Education

The implications are far-reaching for graduate programs, professors, and students. If graduate students wrote 46% of articles published in AEQ during a 19-year period, then it is important to train graduate students in scholarly writing (Blunt & Lee, 1994). Once a student successfully publishes, the newly initiated gain momentum in writing fluency is not easily lost when they gain faculty appointments. Moreover, new faculty members who learned early in their careers to strike the right balance between their writing, teaching, and other collegial responsibilities exhibit high levels of publication productivity (Boice, 1992). Therefore, more course offerings, mentoring partnerships and assistance should be considered for graduate students. Professors should encourage and guide students to start a publishing record early in their programs rather than to wait until the dissertation phase before seriously discussing the writing process.

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