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Bruce Barnett

Rosemary Caffarella

Michael Gimmestad University of Northern Colorado

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Teaching Scholarly Writing to Doctoral Students: Giving Novice Scholars a Running Start

Bruce Barnett, Rosemary Caffarella, Michael Gimmestad

University of Northern Colorado

Abstract: Students entering doctoral programs in adult education and related fields often experience culture shock. Perhaps the biggest adjustment is learning how to think and write like a scholar. This paper examines how involvement by doctoral students in a formal scholarly writing project during their first semester of study influenced their subsequent doctoral experience and professional work.

Introduction Literature Review, and Purpose. Students entering doctoral programs in adult education and related fields often experience culture shock. Perhaps the biggest adjustment is learning how to think and write like a scholar. In some of our doctoral programs we have observed that the teaching of this process often comes in the form of "too little and too late." More specifically, some students may not be exposed to the scholarly writing process until the dissertation stage, which for some students creates problems in their ability to complete the doctoral program. Those of us who facilitate helping students learn the scholarly process find ourselves from time to time asking the following question: Is there a better way to teach these novice scholars what we know about this seemingly mysterious process of scholarly writing?

To respond to this question, the educational leadership faculty in a southwestern university designed a course assignment to teach incoming doctoral students, most of whom are full time practitioners, the scholarly writing process. This assignment, termed the scholarly writing project (SWP), had three major purposes: (1) to investigate a specific area of interest within the content parameters of the class; (2) to engage in the process of critiquing a colleague's work; and (3) to incorporate feedback from colleagues and instructors in redrafting a formal academic paper. In developing the SWP, we tried to simulate what scholarly writing entails. We incorporated materials recommended in the literature on writing and our own experience as faculty with the scholarly writing process. Three components were included as part of this assignment: content, process, and critique. The *content* element focused on the ability of scholars to present an argument for a specific thesis which was grounded in literature and/or empirical research (Melroy, 1994; Moxley, 1992). The *process* element acknowledged that scholarly writing was an ongoing process of writing and rewriting (Curren, 1993; Dugan, 1991; Lamott, 1994). Finally, the *critique* element consisted of being able to receive and use critical feedback and to give helpful feedback as students moved to the final draft of their work (Ashton-Jones, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Lamott, 1994). Most of the literature to support our development of scholarly writing came from scholars in the humanities and the field of composition. Those writing from an educational perspective focused primarily on either the content of the piece or descriptions of what should be included in a scholarly work (e.g., Caffarella and Barnett, 1997; Melroy, 1994).

To better understand students' perceptions of scholarly writing, we were curious about how this process affected their thoughts, feelings, and skills. Learning from students' perceptions about writing has been stressed more recently in the literature on writing (Bishop, 1993; Clark, 1993; Lamott, 1994; Melroy, 1994), encompassing the constructivist or hermeneutic perspective on writing (Clark, 1993). We could only locate two empirical studies which sought student opinions on the writing process (Bishop, 1993; Koncel and Carney, 1992), and of those two, only the Koncel and Carney study examined the perceptions of students in a graduate professional program. They found a gap in thinking between students and faculty as to what constitutes scholarly writing, discovering what students wanted most was to learn how to write more concisely, follow a prescribed format, and use correct

terminology. Faculty, on the other hand, believed students needed to improve their ability to make solid arguments supported by evidence and theory.

To obtain students' perceptions about the scholarly writing process, we collected a variety of information, including their self-perceptions as writers, the help required to produce a SWP, the value of critiquing one another's papers, and the effects of the SWP on their degree program and professional practices. For this particular paper, we report the data about how the SWP influenced students' subsequent doctoral experience and professional work. Discussed in the remainder of this paper are the methods of inquiry and data sources used in the study, the findings related to the effects of the SWP on students' academic activities and their work as professionals, and a discussion of those findings.

Methodology. This study was exploratory and qualitative in nature. The subjects included all students who were enrolled or had graduated in the last four years from a doctoral program in educational leadership at a southwestern university. Two types of data were collected. One data source consisted of gathering the reactions of a student cohort (n=10) about the scholarly writing process during their first semester of graduate study when they were first introduced to the scholarly writing process. Of these 10 respondents, six were males, four were females, and one student was of Hispanic origin and the rest were Caucasian. The majority of these students (9 of 10 or 90%) were working full time in addition to attending school. Throughout the semester, the two professors teaching the course periodically gathered students' written and verbal reactions to the scholarly writing process; students also kept a journal documenting their reactions.

The second type of data entailed asking all students who had been introduced to the scholarly writing process over the past four years (n=37 or 90% of the total population) to participate in a focus group interview. If students lived too far from campus, they were asked to complete a questionnaire covering the same questions as asked during the focus group interviews. In this group of 37 respondents, there was an almost equal portion of male and female students, the majority being Caucasian. About one-third of them were still involved in course work, one-third were taking their comprehensive examinations or were conducting their dissertations, and one-third had graduated from the program. All of the respondents were professional educators, with about 80% being employed full time when these data were gathered. The questions asked in the focus groups and on the questionnaires allowed students to reflect on their subsequent reactions to the scholarly writing process and its impact on their academic and professional work. Because data were collected from four student cohorts, their perceptions were obtained as early as six months after completing the scholarly writing project and as long as three years later. These different types of data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, which resulted in the creation of categories, cluster categories, and then overall themes.

Findings. In exploring the factors which influenced students' perceptions about how the SWP influenced their academic program and professional practice, we discuss first what impact the SWP had on their work as doctoral students. We follow this discussion with an overview of how the students were able to integrate what they learned from the SWP into their practice as professionals.

Influence on Academic Program. In describing how the SWP affected their academic work three major themes emerged. First, students commented on the primarily positive effect the SWP had on completing the various parts of their program including formal course work, the comprehensive examination, and the writing of the dissertation. Overwhelming the students perceived they had used what they had learned from the SWP in completing other classes. More specifically, they spoke about knowing more about the mechanics of writing and better organizing their ideas as writers, including framing sound arguments for the papers they wrote. These sentiments were revealed in these sample comments: "It reorganized the way I think about papers. I started thinking in terms of advanced organizers, transition sentences, how am I going to put citations in here, flow." "Document, document, document...Precise wording, precise sentence structure, precise thought." In addition, students emphasized what they had learned about giving and receiving critique was also key.

Likewise with the comprehensive examination and dissertation process the comments were very similar. For the comprehensive examinations, the students most often noted how the SWP helped them in organizing their responses, being focused, developing formats for the response, and being able to synthesize materials. They were also glad they had received feedback on their writing and scholarship early on in the program. As one student observed, "I'd hate to

get to comps and go through this process and find out that I had some real significant problems getting my ideas across." The one negative perception some students voiced was that the SWP did not help them with the timed portion of the comprehensive exams. In fact, a few students viewed what they learned in the SWP as detrimental to completing the timed exams and that the nature of the exams themselves were an antithesis to what we were teaching them about becoming scholars.

For helping with the dissertation process what seemed especially important was learning that being critiqued thoroughly on their work and rewriting was a normal, and even useful, part of the scholarly writing process, which was evident in these comments: "The critiquing I received...I would have never been able to take that or understand it if I hadn't experienced it in the scholarly writing process." "The fact that I was forced to rewrite that was so central in doing the dissertation." Some students also noted the importance of doing a thorough review of the literature which supported what they wanted to study, and a few even commented that the content for their studies came from their original SWP. One student even remarked that she thought there is "a strong correlation between the scholarly writing project and dissertation completion. You are more fortified to be able to complete it." Another observed that "without the nurture and practice scholarly writing would have remained a mystery for much longer."

The second major theme that emerged from the comments of the students was their sense that many of them had increased their self-confidence as writers and students. The comments of two students exemplify this thought: "It's skill and confidence that are the most important things that come out of this." "I feel like I can do it now, I mean I have reached that point. I have some confidence that I'm at least moving in the right direction. I think that is verification." More specifically, in terms of their confidence as writers, they viewed themselves as growing in their writing and continued to do so as they moved along in the program. In the voice of one of the students: "I think I am a better writer. I think I will be a somewhat different writer, and I probably will be even better."

The third theme that came from the data was that the SWP set the tone and expectations for what was expected of them as doctoral students. As voiced by one student: "You know, the one thing that it [the SWP] did for me was...by having [the SWP] be such a major part of the course it made a real strong statement that [in] this doctoral program...you not only have to be able to have the thoughts, the cognitive piece, but you also have to be able to write." The SWP was also a major motivator for some students in terms of moving forward with their doctoral study as seen in the reflections of another student: "I believe the very act of completing the SWP, in which I was given a lot of positive feedback, may have been the impetus that spurred me on to the completion of my program. It meant a lot that I had proven to myself and my professors that I could think and write in a scholarly fashion". One student summed up the feelings many of the students had about the SWP by using the metaphor of a trip-tic: "I felt like this was the first page of my trip-tic on my journey of getting this done. It is what you build on the whole rest of your time[including], your dissertation. I can't imagine what it would be like not to have that at the beginning."

Influence on Professional Practice. Almost all respondents reported significant changes in one or more aspects of their professional work. The reported changes and observations fall in four general themes. First, the SWP was reported to have significantly impacted a variety of writing responsibilities of the respondents. Writing for professional publication was frequently mentioned, as were improvements in writing skills related to preparation of written reports for presentation to higher-level administrators and governing boards, improvement in the quality of writing for grant proposals, and better written evaluations of staff. One administrator indicated "I write a lot of reports, communications to staff and parents, and I constantly think about active voice, present tense, etc. I feel I critique my work all of the time." One principal observed "I think I've written some of the best [faculty evaluations] I've ever written this year, the best I've written in six years."

The second significant change related to how respondents work with colleagues on written projects. Almost all indicated a higher degree of comfort in working collaboratively on written projects. As one student reported, "The collaborative aspects of completing our projects is the 'real world.' I find myself in collaborative situations daily." They also reported that involvement of others in the writing of materials that they had previously written alone had two outcomes: better products and a stronger working relationship with their partners in writing. The SWP was also reported to have contributed to greater skills in working with others. One student reported "The SWP, along with other writing projects [in the doctoral program], influenced my belief that I have insight in guiding others (professional peers) eager to improve their writing skills."

Third, the SWP has influenced the manner in which students, in their professional roles, expect and invite others to critique their work. A student reported "I look for people to critique my writing who I know are good writers. ... I tend to seek people that I value in terms of their critique, and I'm not sure I would have done that before the SWP." In addition, those employed as administrators reported an increase in their expectations of the level of critical thinking and analysis expected of others with whom they work. That impact was described by one student who said "I set higher expectations for both myself and staff in presenting written articles to the school community, after training on the SWP." There were also expressions of disappointment that others were willing to settle for having written products that had not been well critiqued. There were numerous expressions that the SWP had increased skills in being able to be helpful to those colleagues in improving the quality of their writing. Those with teaching responsibilities indicated that the scholarly writing project had influenced both their expectations of students and the manner in which they work with students on writing projects. Representative of this change is one student's comment: "I am much more of an exacting person today than I was prior to completing my SWP and dissertation. I believe this characteristic influences the way I prepare for college classes I teach and my expectations of students."

The fourth theme centered on contributions of the SWP to a general increase in professional self-confidence and the development of more scholarly "habits of the mind." Students frequently commented that the SWP had increased their self-confidence as professional educators, not only with regard to writing, but also with the assessment of the quality of their thinking and professional judgment. One student said, "I learned the courage to hand my work to someone else for critique. I believe this is important in that I gained a certain confidence that is necessary to be successful." Students reported confidence in evaluating published scholarly writings, where prior to the SWP they were quite accepting of the veracity of anything that had been published. The confidence to critique published materials was expressed by one student who said, "It kind of carried over for me to being more critical of the stuff I was reading from professional journals that a lot of what's published maybe hasn't been critiqued as well as it should have." Numerous comments indicated that the experience had influenced their ways of thinking. As one student reported, "The 'revisions' have changed me from a 'write it on paper person' to a 'write and revise it on the computer person.'" Another student described this impact: "The ability to look at a problem from various points of view and a variety of settings has been invaluable to me in my work as a professional."

Discussion. This study investigated the perceptions of doctoral students regarding their scholarly writing experience, which follows a recent line of research focusing on student perceptions about writing (Bishop, 1993; Caffarella and Barnett, 1997; Clark, 1993; Melroy, 1994). However, we found no empirical work addressing the central theme of this study, namely how an intensive scholarly writing activity impacts students' subsequent performance. In particular, our results indicated that the early involvement in an intensive scholarly writing project had lasting effects on the remainder of students' doctoral program and on their professional practice. This intensive writing experience sets an early expectation for communicating high program standards and for helping students develop clear, well-supported arguments, strategies Koncel and Carney (1992) believe more graduate programs should stress.

Participants clearly felt this initial writing experience and the intensive feedback they received had a significant impact on their subsequent involvement in the doctoral program, especially in their other courses as well as organizing and writing their comprehensive examinations and dissertations. Being more aware of the mechanics of writing (e.g., familiarity with APA format, use of advanced organizers and transitions) sensitized students to how to better prepare papers in other courses, comprehensive examination responses, and the different sections of the dissertation. Koncel and Carney (1992) reported that graduate students felt that mastering these mechanics constituted good writing; however, our findings suggested good writing also entailed how to organize and support thoughts and ideas, impressions usually held by professors. Given the number of revisions involved in developing a dissertation, many students felt less intimidated by having their drafts critiqued by professors. In effect, they saw writing a dissertation as a process (Curren, 1993). Therefore, the constant rewriting process of the dissertation did not come as such a shock to students since they had come to expect such feedback, becoming emotionally prepared for numerous critiques, a topic rarely addressed and which bears more attention in the literature on writing (Caffarella and Barnett, 1997; Fiske, 1992; Lamott, 1994).

Besides using their newly-developed writing skills in other portions of the doctoral program, the scholarly writing experience had an impact on participants' perceptions of their own writing ability and what was expected to be successful. Because many of our doctoral students had not been involved in a formal learning experience for quite

some time, they had self-doubts about being a successful doctoral student. When beginning the program, most students were extremely anxious about how their lack of writing skills would affect their performance, especially in completing a dissertation (Caffarella and Barnett, 1997). Their involvement in a scholarly writing experience early in their program appeared to relieve these anxieties in several ways. First, their self-confidence as writers improved. Based on seeing improvements in their writing over the course of the semester, they believed they could tackle a more ominous writing task, the dissertation. They may well have seen the dissertation as a collaborative process, rather than a solitary activity (Dugan, 1991). Second, their sense of what it means to be a successful doctoral student was clarified. By better understanding what standards were required in the program, and that they could achieve these standards, students' initial self-doubts tended to disappear and were replaced with self-confidence and high expectations for success.

An encouraging conclusion from our investigation was that scholarly writing during their academic program positively influenced participants' professional practices. While the expressed intent of this writing experience was to provide assistance in developing their academic writing skills, an added benefit was the improvement of their professional written and oral communication. For instance, respondents felt they were better able to prepare and write memos, grant proposals, articles for publication, reports, and staff evaluations as well as to deliver oral presentations to their staff, school board members, and legislative bodies. Similarly, they were more confident in assessing the writing and ideas expressed by other people. When reviewing published articles, colleagues' correspondence and verbal presentations, and the written work of students whom they were teaching, respondents were far more likely to analyze the strengths and weakness of these products and presentations, offering helpful suggestions for ways to improve what had been written or expressed. In some cases, they were hesitant to provide feedback, especially to superiors, but found other people to be quite open to their comments.

Somewhat surprising, however, was the impact scholarly writing appeared to have on respondents' professional working relationships. From the collaborative experience of producing a scholarly paper, participants saw the benefit of working together with others to create products in their work settings. Therefore, some students were more likely to develop reports, newsletters, and other written communications jointly with other staff members, rather than by themselves. In this way, they were able to see the benefits of collaborative writing (Ashton-Jones, 1992). Furthermore, the scholarly writing project appeared to sensitize participants to the importance of being succinct and providing support when expressing their ideas. As a result of this shift in their analytical thinking, some students reported they expected others in the organization to demonstrate more sound reasoning for their ideas. In some cases, co-workers' ideas were seen as being underdeveloped and shallow, leading to personal disappointment. Although not reflected in this study, these higher standards and expectations for expressing ideas may create some friction between co-workers, especially if professionals are seen as suddenly becoming overly critical of their colleagues' thoughts.

The ability to organize, support, and clearly communicate written and verbal thoughts is one of the hallmarks of a successful professional. If doctoral programs are to develop the intellectual and practical capacity of professionals, then university professors must be willing to invest time and resources to ensure these outcomes are achieved. Although this small-scale study revealed the positive effects an intensive scholarly writing project can have on the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully complete a doctoral program as well as on professionals' workplace practices and relationships, it certainly is not a definitive study. The small sample size and the use of only perceptual data limit generalizability and in-depth understanding of the lasting effects of scholarly writing. To continue to inquire how scholarly writing activities affect doctoral students, we encourage further studies of this type. Without this inquiry, we run the risk of subjecting doctoral students to meaningless and frustrating experiences, rather than helping them become more articulate, thoughtful, and collaborative professionals.

*References

*A complete reference list will be given at the conference