# Reflections on the Writing Process: Guiding the Work of Writing

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**Abstract:** A heuristic process was used to examine the experience of teaching writing for publication. Faculty and student reflections are presented.

Graduate students learn that writing for publication is a different skill than writing a good quality term paper. Unfortunately, the transition from writing a term paper to an academic paper is difficult to make. Graduate students have few opportunities to take courses concerned with writing for publication, few opportunities to observe faculty members critiquing a manuscript or struggling to write the first sentence for a new manuscript. The result of this is that few students pursuing a doctorate ever publish and when they do, it is likely to be the dissertation (Berquist, 1983). There is a gap in graduate school training that includes teaching the process of writing for publication (Jackson, Nelson, Heggins, Baatz, & Schuh, 1999; Rippenberger, 1998) which is frequently assumed to be something students innately know how to do (Gaillet, 1996) or the job of other faculty (Sullivan, 1994).

## Method

A problem facing adult and higher education faculty is how best to encourage and direct students towards greater participation and success in the writing process. This is important not only for students who want to go on to faculty and research positions, but is also [important for the development of reflective practitioners. Using Moustakas (1990), we have embarked on a heuristic study of the ways we have attempted to foster students' scholarly writing. The questions we are struggling with are: (a) How do we facilitate or teach scholarly writing? (b) How do we mentor students to become practitioner researchers and scholars? and (c) How do we best model the scholarly writing process?

The heuristic method of self-dialogue utilizes self disclosure of oneself and others to elicit tacit and explicit knowledge around a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). The students and faculty are at different phases in Moustakas' six phase process of initial engagement, immersion into the topic or question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination. The faculty and students are at different phases due to our educational and professional experiences preparing us differently. The lead researcher has been thinking about the issue of graduate student writing for publication for years as a research and service issue while the other faculty author has thought about it more in terms of mentoring. While some of the students enrolled in the course to learn the mechanics of writing just to achieve the end of publication, others continue to actively struggle with the writing process by participation in a writing group begun after the class ended and by continuing to work on writing projects from this course and others.

Between us (the faculty authors), we have attempted to teach, mentor, and model the writing process in six ways: a course on writing for publication, a course that involved students in a sponsored research project, a structured literature review course, the formation of a writing group, development of students' individual writing projects, and co-authorship with students. This paper will reflect on these attempts with the primary focus being on the structured literature

review course offered in the summer of 2002. Consistent with Moustakas (1990) and with our own efforts to encourage student writing, we invited students to be full participants in writing this paper. The first step was a request for them to share their reflections to a set of specific questions, which we emailed them at the formal end of the structured literature review course. The questions were:(a) What did you know about writing and research before taking this class? (b) What do you know now about writing and research that you did not know before taking this class? (c) What did you like best about this class? (d)What did you like least about this class? (e)What suggestions for improvement would you give us? Ten of the thirteen students enrolled in the course responded to each of these questions, one student sent a summary paragraph, and two others have not responded. The summary of responses was sent to the entire group of students with the request that they look for themes in the data, define the themes, and provide examples for them. The discussion below begins with the faculty interpretation of the responses and is followed by a discussion of the student interpretation of the responses. Finally, the students and faculty interpretations are contrasted and discussed.

## Faculty Reflections

Four areas of reflection emerged from a preliminary analysis of the student responses to the questions above. They have been named reflection process, approach, modeling, and dilemmas. The reflection process revealed a range of abilities to self-reflect. The approach students took towards writing had four orders: mechanical, technical, committed, and beginning scholarly. Modeling was attempted in a variety of ways using the faculty authors' work, students, work, and examples from other scholars. Dilemmas surrounded issues of us vs. them, conceptual framework, understanding method, and excitement for the topic.

*Reflection Process*

One of the lessons we took from this is that graduate students are not prepared to reflect on their own work. They might be able to critique the work of others but are not prepared to critique their own work. Another is that the majority of students saw the writing process as a series of mechanical steps directed towards completing a task. Some of them started to understand that scholarly writing involved more technical aspects than they had at first realized. In this way, they were able to differentiate between term papers and writing for publication. While this was a positive development, many students missed that scholarly writing involves and requires interpretation. They started to realize that writing was a process and not just a task to be completed in compliance with a course deadline. They also recognized that they needed to read more widely and in greater depth than what would normally be required for a course.

Despite this, many tended to see scholarly writing as a collection of facts supported by citations. The students had difficulty viewing the literature for the conceptual framework as useful to support or refute the argument they were developing. Instead it was a reporting of the literature to which the students' work was tacked on at the end. Students had not found their own voice or style but instead looked to mimic not model academic writers. One student thought that the literature review would reveal truth while another thought that academic writing was something that others did.

*Approach*

The students took different approaches towards the work of reviewing literature in a field. These approaches have four orders: mechanical, technical, committed, and beginning scholarly. The four orders build on each other so that a student who is approaching the writing project

using the beginning scholarly approach has incorporated the other approaches into her or his view of writing.

*Mechanical.* Mechanical is an approach to writing that sees writing as a series of tasks to be completed. We view this as a lower order approach to writing or what students might call the "literature dump" or as students stated "simply compiling others' thoughts and ideas without synthesizing it" because "truth is found…[in] the literature surrounding the subject." The mechanical approach provided a comprehensive reporting of the literature but lacks an understanding of the use of the literature review in the research process.

*Technical.* Technical writing is at a higher order and includes the mechanical steps, but the student understands there is a purpose and rationale for these steps. Students still struggle with the relationship between the use of conceptual frameworks, interpretation and the purpose of the paper but understand that these are a vital part of academic writing.

*Committed writing.* Committed writing has the same status as technical writing. The approach, however, comes first from a passion for and then a commitment to the topic. When a technical view is combined with inspiration, a passion, and commitment to a question, then scholarly writing can occur in a conscious and cautious way.

*Beginning scholarly.* For a student approach writing from a beginning scholarly perspective, the other three orders are in evidence. Four to six of the students fell into this category. Their passion and commitment have kept them working on their projects for almost a year after the course ended.

*Modeling*

Modeling occurred in several ways: by sharing our own writings, in sharing what we considered high quality academic work on the topic of critical race theory, and through team teaching. Our shared writings were published pieces, a manuscript accepted for publication, and another manuscript under review. The manuscript under review went through a major revision as a result of the review process. However, students saw the work of the faculty as perfect examples of scholarly work to follow precisely, even though our intent was to share work in process so students could see the development of a piece of writing. Students could not understand how to use these pieces as a point of departure for their papers or that their purposes in conducting a structured literature review were different than the faculty examples of a structured literature review. Some students reported that they read research both for content and to seek a model for their own work.

Team teaching proved to be most problematic because students were accustomed to classes that followed a set sequence with clear answers. When we answered questions in different ways and showed students that more than one approach was possible, it created a cognitive dissonance. One of the problems was that instead of seeing this as a sharing of multiple perspectives on a problem, some viewed this as lack of coordination between the professors, not realizing that reviewers of any piece of writing might have divergent or even opposing views on how to improve a piece of writing. In addition, critiques provided in class and online were taken as individual critiques and not related to another's work. In other words, students who made the same mistakes or shared the same issues in their writing did not recognize the issue as one they shared in common. This made it difficult for us to form a collaborative learning community where the exchange of ideas around the writing process were given and taken by peers. Instead, throughout the term, faculty were seen as instructors, possessors of knowledge, and purveyors of wisdom that the students were to receive and absorb.

*Dilemmas*

Dilemmas surrounded issues of us vs. them, conceptual framework, understanding method, and excitement for the topic. The inability to form a collaborative learning community highlights the dilemma of "us and them." Students saw the professors (us) as the experts from which knowledge and criticism flowed (to them). The notion of a conceptual framework as something important but intangible was evident. For instance, the suggestion was made to have another class to help students "create their theoretical frameworks, because … this was one of my major set backs" after "concrete" discussion of the theory used as a lens in the structured literature review. That a theoretical or conceptual framework was important, students seemed to understand but exactly what it is or how to use one was difficult for them to articulate or demonstrate in their own writing. The method for conducting a structured literature review was also a problem. At the first class session, we discussed a variety of ways to approach a structured literature review, believing and suggesting that students decide an appropriate method for their project. Since they could not understand that the manuscripts and articles written by the faculty were models, they instead tried to replicate the methods used in these pieces without regard to the purpose or intent of their own projects. This quotation from one student exemplifies this dilemma:

> I wish method were introduced earlier. It is true we had exemplary papers to read, but I think we all lacked some theoretical explanation about method. Most of us simply imitated what we had seen in the articles, because we didn't know how to approach our critique in a different way.

Since students had not taken the initiative or become self-directed learners around this issue of method, we introduced a content analysis method that we thought would be useful to most students. Another dilemma is that most (if not all) of these students had research courses but had not learned how to translate what they had learned in the courses into action that produced scholarship.

## Students' Perceptions and Reflections

Prior to taking the Critical Race Theory (CRT) class (the structured literature review class referred to by the faculty authors), many of the students had some understanding of writing and research. Quite a few of the respondents stated that they had developed researching skills in other classes, but as one of them said "a paper of this magnitude and at this level" was a new experience for them. All of the students were exposed to the CRT literature for the first time, and many of them struggled with the principles or tenets that are at the heart of CRT. As one of the professors stated during one of the class sessions, just being exposed to CRT meant that these students knew more about it than ninety-nine percent of the general U.S. population. The purpose of this class was to have the students examine peer-reviewed publications that focus on issues in their particular fields by using CRT as the theoretical framework to evaluate these publications. Four themes emerged from four the students: an autobiography of writing and research styles, the process of writing, beliefs and perceptions, and the purpose of writing.

*Autobiography of Writing and Research Styles*

An autobiography of writing and research styles is a personal account of one's own approach to writing and research in regards to the initial stage of writing. For instance, students indicated that they began with the stage of creating an outline or overall structure for the paper. Their systematic personal approach when collecting data or information included structure, format, and content. In describing their approaches to writing and research, most of the

respondents stated that they usually selected a topic first, and then they would conduct research. This research was usually done in a manner that reinforced their preconceived notions about a particular topic. They seemed to be citing authors in a haphazard way. Many of the students stated they would simply find authors whose articles were in line with their opinions. This approach to writing and research is a very superficial one because by collecting sources to backup one's research, the writer may not know (a) what type of contributions a particular author brings to a field, (b) if these contributions have generally been accepted or rejected by colleagues, and (c) if what he or she is writing is adding new insight on the particular topic. When reviewing the responses from these students, one will notice that many of the students appear to approach writing and research in ways that are faulty. In all but a couple of cases, the respondents' approaches to writing and research are less than systematic and lack thoroughness.

*Process of Writing*

The process of writing refers to the internal dialogue that accompanies the formulation of a topic area or conceptual framework for a paper. The dialogue moves in a fluid manner among internal-group-class dialogue. It is ultimately the sharing of thoughts and the receiving of feedback. All of the respondents agreed that after taking the class, they had a better understanding about how writing and research should be conducted. They all concurred that one part of the process is dependent on the previous part. As one student said, "Prior to this class I found myself duplicating my research efforts and had difficulty assembling all of my research material." Many of their responses about what they now knew surrounded the idea that conducting writing and research in an organized fashion is preferable to what they had previously done. Some of the changes in their approaches were that they read more and with a more critical eye.

*Beliefs and Perceptions of Writing and Research*

Beliefs and perceptions of writing and research included the fear, frustration, and the commitment that are intertwined in the writing and research process as well as examining one's beliefs and value system in an external fashion by using concrete written words. There are three components to this: past experience, present experience, and future expectations. As far as their beliefs about writing and research, many of the respondents recognize that it is a very involved undertaking. These beliefs contradict what many of these respondents said about how they approach writing and research. Another interesting observation about their beliefs is that a few felt that writing and researching are very personal. As a matter of fact, there was a strong emphasis on the personal in many of the responses to reflection questions about the course.

*Reflections on Writing and Research*

Reflections on writing and research occurred when students examined their reasons for pursuing writing and the purpose of their writing projects. The three components of this are personal, professional, and scholarly. There was diversity in professional experiences, CRT authors, types of papers, and also insights from the co-instructors. The least liked aspects of the course were the lack of readings by original CRT authors and the difficulty of framing and planning the method section. Many of the suggestions for improvement of the class centered on how to better teach students the application of theory to the writing process.

## Implications for Adult and Higher education

Many books on writing suggest that in order to improve one's writing, one needs to change an attitude (Apps, 1982), or that a scheduled time needs to be set aside to write (Rankin, 1999). These are simplistic approaches to a problem that begins with faculty responsibility. We

must change the way we approach writing and treat scholarly writing as a continuous process that begins early in graduate education. This begins with a conscious decision to place a course on writing for publication early or later in the program. It also requires coordination between faculty within a program and between faculty in other programs teaching research methods. If advanced graduate students are to learn how to write for publication, then some form of scholarly writing should be taught in addition to the course content. Research courses should include writing projects where students apply methods to pilot research projects with the goal of submitting the work to conferences and further developing a piece of writing throughout the graduate program until it is suitable for submission. Graduate students need assistance to see the connections between concepts and tools learned in one course to work done in other courses. Finally, graduate students need to learn to view writing as a heuristic process that can help them learn not just how to write but how to discover their own voices and how to add their voices to a larger community.

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