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Guiding the Work of Writing: Reflections on the Writing Process

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Abstract: The phenomenon of teaching and learning the writing for publication process was examined from the perspectives of instructors and the students.

Introduction

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, 1991).

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. We have embarked on a heuristic study of the ways we have attempted to foster students' scholarly writing (Moustakas, 1990). 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 the six phase process of initial engagement, immersion into the topic or question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination. 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. 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 questions. Ten of the thirteen students responded to each question, one sent a summary paragraph, and two did not respond. The response summary was sent to all students with the request that they look for themes across the responses, define the themes, and provide examples for them. Two students did this separately and then came together to discuss the process.

Faculty Reflections

Four areas emerged from a preliminary analysis of the student responses and our own observations from the class. They have been named lessons learned, approach, modeling, and dilemmas. Lessons learned were on students' experiences with writing, and their ability to critique their work and the work of others. The approach students took towards writing had four orders: mechanical, technical, committed, and beginning scholarly. Modeling occurred in several ways: by sharing our own writings, in sharing what we considered high quality academic work, through collaboration, mentoring, and demonstrating conflict and difference in research and through team teaching. Dilemmas surrounded issues of us vs. them, conceptual framework, understanding method, and excitement for the topic.

Lessons Learned

We found students had a great sense of social inequities and educational issues and deep insights into institutional power relationships that impact on work and education opportunities. Students could talk about their ideas in class but struggled to present them in writing. They lacked the skill to take these insights and turn them into well organized articulate arguments on paper. Lessons we learned were that students (a) viewed writing as mechanical, (b) did not understand the conceptual or theoretical frameworks, (c) had difficulty reflecting and critiquing their work, and (d) were superficial in their critique of others' work.

Some students started to differentiate between the technical requirements of term papers vs. writing for publication. For instance how to use literature to build a problem statement or that using flowery phrases with lots of words was not good writing. Students 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.

Writing for publication we felt meant writing something meaningful or innovative that could inform or advance knowledge or thinking about an area. But in order to advance knowledge in a field the author has to think he or she has something worthwhile to write. 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.

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Students are not prepared to reflect on their own work or the work of others. Their critiques were limited to the basic aspects of writing such as spelling and grammar. Few ventured to provide suggestions on word choice, headings, or sentence flow though some did suggest topic, transitional, and summary sentences. Rough drafts of our work were viewed as well crafted work. This lack of confidence in their abilities to appreciate good writing and improve writing might be explained as an artifact of the power differential between faculty and students or a product the process of teaching and learning writing.

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 is an approach to writing that sees writing as a series of tasks to be completed. This is a lower order approach to writing or what students might call the “literature dump” or “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 lacked an understanding of the relationship of the literature to the research process. 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 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. When a student approaches writing from a beginning scholarly perspective, the other three orders are in evidence.

Modeling

Modeling occurred in several ways: by sharing our own writings, in sharing what we considered high quality academic work, through collaboration, demonstrating conflict and difference in research 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 structured literature reviews.

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. Instead of seeing this as a sharing of multiple perspectives on a problem, some viewed this as lack of coordination between faculty, not realizing that reviewers of any piece of writing might have divergent or even opposing views on how to improve a piece of writing.

Dilemmas

Dilemmas surrounded issues of us vs. them, conceptual framework, understanding method, and excitement for the topic. 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, suggesting that students determine the method appropriate for their project. Instead of viewing the faculty examples as models, they tried to replicate the methods without regard to the different purpose and styles demonstrated. Exemplifying this dilemma a student wrote:

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.

Another dilemma is that most of the 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

The students' responses fell into three general categories: assumptions and perceptions, process, and reflections on research and writing.

Assumptions and Perceptions

Students believed that the process of writing was easy and that writing can be done in an efficient manner by following a step by step process. One student stated: “My approach to writing has simply been compiling others thoughts and ideas without synthesizing the information, discriminating between the information being given, or using the information to support my argument(s).”

Purcell-Gates (1995) describes writing as not “simply oral language written down” (p. 43); it is the process of writing text not that of writing speech. For graduate students undergoing the process of becoming academic writers this is something we struggle with. As one student responded, “During the formative years of my writing, I was continually admonished for ‘writing like I talk.’ Therefore, I began to put forth a special effort not to ‘write like I talk.’”

Academic or scholarly writing cannot be separated from research. Doing research is part of the process of putting one's thoughts on paper. The responses from the students illustrate each had different approaches to writing and research. One student's approach was to “just pick a topic and just begin writing and then finding the research to back me up.” Another student approached the process in a very structured way:

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I try to identify the area and issue I am going to be developing in the paper; then I proceed by finding literature on the subject that deals with the area I am working with; following this I look through the literature and examine points that are relevant for my paper; lastly I begin the paper, which I then revise.

Structure is essential to developing good writing and research habits. Structure does not necessarily mean one that writing fits within some neat little box. When students selected a topic first, and then conducted research, the research was done to reinforce a preconceived notion. Students cited authors in a haphazard way sometimes simply finding authors whose views supported their own. This approach is superficial because the student fails to explore (a) the nature of the author's contributions to a field, (b) the quality of the contribution, and (c) the originality of the piece.

The Process: Research and Writing

Some students approached writing with an internal dialogue. The internal dialogue included the mental process of conceptualizing the idea then planning the work. Ideas were triggered by discussions, popular media, and current events. One student wrote:

I usually start thinking about writing ahead of time. I jot things and thoughts down. I determine the purpose. I state my main arguments on paper. I read a lot, then I sleep, then I write. Then I break. Then I read more, write, then break.

Internal dialogue continues to redefine new knowledge in terms of old knowledge and old knowledge in terms of in new knowledge. Internal dialogue propelled students to the next stage of the writing process where questions are asked, but not necessarily answered. The internal dialogue is an interplay of social, political, and cultural realities which begin to formulate a theory or infect a pure thought. This interplay, of realities and processes, make writing a deeply private and public process at the same time. A student wrote, "Writing and research is a journey not a destination," while another student wrote,

I am also able to use several points of view that are similar or dissimilar and support my argument. I now appreciate the essence of a literature review and how to select authorities respective to their subject matter or expertise. The importance of reviewing peers' written work and giving feedback. Most important, a writing project is not a one-time experience—it evolves and matures as time passes by.

This is a recurring theme in the responses from the participants. Many stated that as the semester progressed they gained a greater understanding of the process, and they also paid more attention to details. As a result they felt a greater commitment to the writing process in general and their own research.

Reflection on the Process

Students agreed that after taking the class they had a better understanding of the process and that one part of the process is dependent on the previous part. As a student wrote "prior to this class I found myself duplicating my research efforts and had difficulty assembling all of my

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research material.” Changes in student approaches included (a) conducting writing and research in an organized fashion was better than their old habits, (b) reading more and with a more critical eye, and (c) writing in a systematic and effective manner produced good results. The course features students liked were the diversity of ideas and multiple perspectives. The course features students liked least was the lack of required readings by Critical Race Theory authors and difficulties with framing and planning the method section.

Implications for Adult and Higher Education

Some books on writing suggest that, to improve writing, a person needs to change an attitude (Apps, 1982) or 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 decisions to offer and where to locate within the curriculum a course on writing for publication, (b) coordination between program and research faculty on application of research to writing, and (c) consensus of program faculty on the importance of teaching writing through the curriculum. If graduate students are to learn how to produce scholarly writing, then it 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 make connections between concepts and tools learned in one course to work done in other courses. Finally, when graduate students learn to view writing as a heuristic process that can help them explore ideas and discover their own voices, practitioners and scholars alike can add to the knowledge base and their voices to a larger community.

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