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A University's Writing Practices from the Inside Perspective of the Writing Center

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Carol Severino and Matthew Gilchrist: A University's Writing Practices from the Inside Perspective of the Writing Center

The University of Iowa's Writing Center, sponsored by the Rhetoric Department, is uniquely positioned to observe the multiple writing practices of the University, especially the types of academic and professional writing created by undergraduates and graduate students. Our three programs—Enrollment, Appointment, and Online Tutoring—attract thousands of students per year who are writing in various disciplines in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences as well as in other colleges across the University. Every year, we see many hundreds of different writing projects, totaling tens of thousands of pages. In responding to this volume and diversity of writing, we see the ways in which student writing succeeds to varying degrees. Successful student writing, from the perspective of the Writing Center, is writing that accomplishes the learning objectives of instructors' assignment prompts or succeeds in the rhetorical situations posed by non-course-related and real-world writing.

Provided with such wide access to the creations of University writers and to the assignments that elicit this writing, it is relevant to ask, from the Writing Center's insider point of view, what are the most common types of writing that students are doing?; what kinds of writing tasks are instructors most frequently assigning?; and what particular challenges are associated with specific writing tasks? In answering these questions, we hope to provide instructors with assignment options and alternatives and encourage them to examine how their present assignments are enacting their learning goals. We also believe that instructors will benefit from our discussion of the challenges exhibited in less-than-successful student drafts in order to more effectively teach students how to benefit from the specific teaching goals of writing assignments. This inquiry should also be useful to curriculum evaluation committees in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and across the University curriculum.

In order to determine the various types of writing tasks students are performing, we looked at data from a representative program—our online tutoring service—during a representative semester—Fall 2007. Online tutoring data are easier to research than face-to-face data because they are electronically stored and can be analyzed at a later date. Unlike with face-to-face tutorials, when writers submit their drafts

online, they fill out a submission form that asks them to tell us the details of the assignment they are responding to. Because so many courses now have online components, many students paste in all or part of the assignment from the course website. Others summarize what they understand to be the assignment they have received. Of course, it is possible that some writers who summarize or paraphrase all or parts of the assignment are misinterpreting what is required of them, for example, stating they are being asked merely to discuss a topic when in reality they are being asked to analyze it. And even if students do accurately represent their assignment on the submission form, it doesn't necessarily mean that they understand the assignment or have accomplished its task(s). The bottom line is that online tutoring provides us easy access to "a" version of the writing assignment even though we are often uncertain which words in the assignment description on the submission form are the instructors' and which words the students', and whether the students' representations of the assignments are accurate.

The Fall 2007 online tutoring database consists of 844 online draft submissions by 437 writers: 360 of these writers were undergraduates, 155 enrolled in a Rhetoric courses and 205 in other courses across the college(s). Seventy-one of these writers were graduate students and six were faculty and staff. There are always more online draft submissions than writers because many writers use online tutoring for multiple writing assignments. In addition, if there is enough time before the due date, writers submit revised drafts based on the online tutors' feedback. Because over a third of the students who submitted in fall 2007 were enrolled in a Rhetoric course—usually first-year students—at least a third of the writing assignments we reviewed were for Rhetoric and other introductory courses and General Education requirements such as Interpretation of Literature and Introduction to Philosophy, to American Politics, to Law, and to Pre-History.

In attempting to classify the multitudinous writing assignments, tasks, and genres we saw in those 844 draft submissions, we found it helpful to use the broad categories developed by Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) scholars such as Toby Fulwiler, Christopher Thaiss, Donna LeCourt and Art Young. Some tasks they consider Writing to Learn, that is, to learn the course content, or to learn skills like analysis and critical thinking. Other tasks are more geared towards Learning to Write, that is, learning to write like a professional or practitioner of a discipline. We classified the most common Writing to Learn types of tasks we found in the Fall 2007 online tutoring database as Reading Responses, Analyses of Texts, and Arguments from or about a Source(s) (see Figure 1). The most common Learning to Write tasks we classified as Professional Writing, Applications of Course Concepts, and Reports of Empirical Research. Writing to Learn and Learning to Write are not a dichotomy, but a continuum and a matter of emphasis by instructors in their course and assignment design. Some assignments, however, were hybrid or mixed-task, especially those that combined Argument with another task such as Analysis or Application. We also saw creative writing—fiction, non-fiction, and poetry—both assignment-based and self-sponsored, but will not be examining those tasks here.

Writing to Learn	Learning to Write
Reading Responses	Professional Writing
Analysis of Text	Reports of Empirical Research
Arguments from or about Sources	Application of Course Concepts

Figure 1. Examples of Writing to Learn and Learning to Write Tasks

Instead of adopting a genre-based approach whereby disciplines are assumed to have their own specific genres which belong to them and them alone, we adopted Michael Carter’s approach of meta-genres that transcend disciplines. For example, the report of empirical research is found throughout all the social and natural sciences; in fact, two quantitative studies in two disciplines might be more similar to one another than a qualitative and quantitative study within the same discipline. However, each report of empirical research will be, in Carter’s words, “inflected” by the conventions of the particular discipline. For example, a report of a study in chemistry is more likely to have equations than a report of a study in education.

We will take these six assignment task types one by one, give examples of assignments we saw across the disciplines that seemed to fit that type, and note the specific challenges they pose for writers.

Writing to Learn: The Reading Response

A reading response usually involves reacting to course reading(s) by summarizing it, interpreting it, applying it, and/or critiquing aspects of it. Instructors assign reading responses in order to have students communicate and thus learn ideas from the readings, and often to formulate an evaluation of those ideas. In the words of one of the assigning instructors, a response is more formal and thought out than a journal entry or a freewrite. However, it doesn’t seem to involve an overall unified argument. Among the Reading Responses we saw were those from:

- Interpretation of Literature: Explain “your personal thoughts, feelings, ideas, opinions as they pertain to elements of the class texts.”
- Introduction to Philosophy: Characterize Socrates’ argument in *The Meno*.
- Honors First Year Seminar on Supreme Court Cases: Summarize and critique Thurgood Marshall’s argument on the occasion of the bi-centennial of the U.S. Constitution.
- Introduction to Law: Summarize an article from the news on a legal issue of interest to you.

These assignments depend on careful, close reading and interpretation and often require choosing and integrating quotations from the readings. As with most academic writing, they are reading assignments as well as writing assignments. As Reading Responses are sometimes multi-part assignments, writers often develop one part, say, the critique, at the expense of the other, the summary usually meant to reinforce learning course content.

Writing to Learn: Analysis of Text

Analysis of Text broadly construes “text” to include: essays, speeches, editorials, journal articles, poems, plays, short stories, novels, films, video clips, TV shows, photographs, paintings, songs, a technology, conversations, ads, or commercials. Writers are often asked to point out how certain textual elements (metaphor, point

of view, character, rhetorical appeals, scene, stanza, line, sound, brush strokes, color, camera movement, juxtaposition) contribute to the text's overall theme or how these elements work, or to compare and contrast two or more texts. Representative examples we saw were:

- Rhetoric: Analyze an editorial or essay that takes a stance on a current issue, explaining what the writer does to create an effective argument. Consider elements like tone, appeals to the reader's emotions, appeals to the writer's credibility, appeals to logic, targeting a specific audience, order/presentation of ideas, humor, satire, and more.

- Introduction to American Politics: "Attend any presidential campaign event where the candidate of either party is actually present and speaking. Analyze the campaign event using the framework of what we are learning in class this semester (e.g. audience addressed, references to other candidates, choice of topics, promises made)."

- Introduction to the English Major: "Show how just one stanza or part of the poem fits within, articulates, and furthers the meaning of the poem as a whole."

- Western Art and Culture before 1400: "Argue a specific thesis about how the comparative but contrasting forms of the two chosen art works (two masks or two vases) express the ideas or values of the patrons, artists, and societies that created them."

The challenges of Analysis assignments are that students might not completely understand the definition of the element(s) they are being asked to use, or they might not understand the overall meaning of the text. They often summarize or describe what is happening in the text instead of using the elements to probe more deeply into how the text works. According to Linda Flower, the way students represent the assigned task to themselves is crucial; if students lack experience with analysis or are confused by the assignment, they may substitute the simpler task of summary and description.

Writing to Learn: Arguments from or About Sources

Arguments from or About Sources implicitly if not explicitly require students to use the skills of Reading Response (e.g. "What is the text saying?") and Analysis (e.g. "How is the text making its point?") meta-genres in order to synthesize information presented by texts in support of the validity of an original assertion that is or could be opposed by another line of reasoning. In addition to involving skills of Reading Response and Analysis to varying degrees, assignments to Argue from or About Sources fall along a continuum from prescriptive (assigning a specific topic or even a specific thesis statement) to flexible (leaving all or many of the decisions about the paper for the writer).

Arguments from Sources:

- Rhetoric: "Advocate a border policy with regards to the United States/Mexico border."

- Introduction to Prehistory: How has "the advent of agriculture and later agricultural dependency impacted the human past"? Were the impacts positive or negative or some combination of both?

- Issues in International Relations: Make a case for trade liberalization.

- Biology of the Brain: What is "the relationship of the conscious self to the brain"?

Arguments About Sources:

- Literature and Sexualities: “How are women portrayed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? Is the text misogynistic? Are the characters?”
- Western Civilization: “About James Farr’s *A Tale of Two Murders*, answer the following questions: How was the case built up for and against Philippe Giroux? Do you feel the final verdict was justified? Why or why not? What examples from the book can you present in support?”

Because argumentative papers demand the skills represented in Analysis and Reader Response assignments, student writers may have difficulty understanding that they must move beyond these skills in order to argue. Many students substitute an observation of fact for a thesis that demands justification. Some students, perhaps conditioned by politically correct society to be uncomfortable taking a controversial stance, describe and may analyze many possible viewpoints without moving toward an argument of their own.

Learning to Write: Professional Writing

In the many genres of professional writing, for example, the statement of purpose (sop), students are presenting themselves—their backgrounds, their interests, their attributes—not to fulfill a course assignment, but in order to obtain an opportunity or an award, that is, a job, a scholarship, or entrance to graduate or professional school. The kinds of feedback students request from Writing Center tutors on these submissions suggest that they are highly invested in perfecting their self-portrayals in order to increase their persuasive power. Influenced by high stakes and working with deadlines that are perhaps months (rather than days or hours) away, writers are willing to revise and resubmit their personal statements multiple times to on-line tutors. It is no surprise that students often seem to be more invested in writing to obtain a job, money, or recognition than they are to fulfill an assignment and get a grade. In writing these professional genres, students are learning first hand whether their words can positively affect audiences and open doors for them. The most common genres of professional writing we saw were:

- Personal Statements: for graduate, law, pharmacy, medical, dentistry, and nursing school, as well as programs in business, journalism, and education and transfer to other colleges. Graduate students sent in their teaching philosophies and their statements of research interests.
- Application Essays: for fellowships, grants, study abroad, residency, awards, conference travel money, academic jobs, the Peace Corps.

Challenges of these high-stakes genres include not simply reproducing the list of activities and achievements that already appear on the résumé or CV, avoiding clichés such as “I want to be a doctor (lawyer, social worker, nurse) because I love to help people,” and walking the fine line between constructing oneself as unique and special, but not strange or weird. Such self-representations may involve telling a story about an experience that influenced the writer’s decision to want to enter a specific profession; students may have to search their personal histories for such stories. However, even when they come up with significant experiences to relate,

they have grown so accustomed to expository academic writing that they are unsure about how to tell a story and connect its meaning to their professional goals.

Learning to Write: Proposals for and Reports of Empirical Research

Most proposals and reports we received in Fall 2007 were written by graduate students in the Social and Health Sciences, especially Education, Nursing, and Public Health, on original research they would do or had done themselves, collecting their own data from experiments, surveys, interviews, observations, and texts. Genres include final course papers based on independent research results, conference proposals and presentations, articles for publication, thesis and dissertation prospectuses, and the theses and dissertations themselves.

Learning to Write: Application of Course Concepts to the Real World

Writing Across the Curriculum theorist David Russell argues that instructors can increase students' investment in their writing by asking them to assume the personae of practitioners of the discipline or profession and think and write as would a specialist applying concepts learned in class to solve real-world problems or in response to a real-world situation. Among the assignments we saw that asked students to apply core course concepts in response to a likely scenario or situation were:

- Non-Profit Organization Effectiveness: Draft a mission statement of a hypothetical organization, detailing its vision and values.
- Art History as a Discipline: Act as a curator of an art exhibition, choose the works of art, and prepare the exhibition catalogue.
- History of Economic Thought: "Take an economist's views and apply them to a current policy or practical problem."
- Principles of Course Design for Language Teaching: Design a foreign language teaching unit, with materials and methods.
- Disability and Care: "Based on your observations of a special education class and a therapy session at a center, come up with a proposal of long-term and short-term plans for improving, enhancing, and facilitating the care for the disabled [...]."

The pitfalls of this task type would seem to be fewer than for other tasks although students could solve the problem or respond to the situation without directly applying enough of the course content, instead using more of their common sense or their personal or field experience.

Conclusion

In reviewing the data of the Writing Center's online tutoring program and reflecting on both the types of assignments offered at our university and the draft responses to those assignment types, we noticed that the most common writing obstacle students face is lack of knowledge about or misinterpretation of the kinds of tasks assignments demand. To overcome this obstacle, we recommend that instructors use language in their assignment prompt that reflects the meta-genre skills outlined here. In addition to clearly stating the topic of a writing assignment, writing prompts could specify the writing purpose (Writing to Learn or Learning to Write) and the task genre (response, analysis, argument, etc.) and follow through with a

context-specific definition of these purposes and tasks.

Additionally, though class meeting time is dear, and instructors must cover the necessary material, taking time during class to talk about expectations for a writing assignment will save considerable anguish. As Linda Flower's Task Representation research suggests, it would be helpful for the instructor to then ask students to repeat back their understanding of the assignment's goals and requirements in order to correct misconceptions.

Incorporating process writing into the course structure will also allow instructors to steer students more effectively toward the kind of writing demanded by specific learning goals. Some steps that might be included and formalized in the course schedule are brainstorming, topic proposals, outlines, first draft, revisions, final draft, and reflection. Input from the instructor and/or peers at various stages in a writing process helps writers to learn more from the assignment and to focus and reflect on the writing goals as they write. Instructors who teach large classes and cannot respond to each student's process-writing steps might consider peer workshops or portfolio-styled assignments that prompt self-guided reflection and revision.

Instructors themselves can do much to stimulate student writing that achieves specific learning and course goals. When instructors reflect on the nature of the tasks required in their prompts and the challenges students typically encounter when faced with those tasks, they will be better able to communicate their expectations for students and to help them avoid common pitfalls. Furthermore, such communication of expectations would ensure that students understand the learning goals behind each of their writing assignments. This will increase student investment in the writing, which would be less likely perceived as busy work. As is suggested by our observations about the Learning to Write: Professional Writing task genre, personal investment and clear stakes encourage students to start earlier and work through more revisions, and these practices make for better writing with a greater likelihood of accomplishing teaching objectives.

It is important that instructors who use writing as a teaching tool understand the diverse writing contexts in which their students are composing. Awareness of these contexts, their concomitant task genres, and students' common pitfalls within them will help instructors make purposeful choices about assigning and discussing writing.

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Laila S. Dahan: Where Have all the Readers Gone? Improving Writing through Reading for EFL Learners in the Arabian Gulf

As a writing instructor at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, every day can be extremely challenging but, more often than not, very rewarding. The University is a not-for-profit private institution based on the U.S. model while being grounded in the local culture. We are fortunate to have over 70 nationalities represented among our student body of about 4000 students. Granted, not every nationality is in each class, but I do have the opportunity to encounter and teach many of these different nationalities and cultures every semester. I teach four writing courses each term with about 16-18 students in every class. These are introductory courses mainly for entering freshmen, some sophomores, and those who didn't pass the first time. Most of our students completed high school either at private international schools or public schools in their home countries. Our institution requires a TOEFL score of 530 or higher in order for a student to matriculate. Unfortunately, despite that score our students, as a general rule, do not arrive with the necessary skills needed to jump directly into writing. In fact, many of them reveal they have never written an essay in any language throughout high school. My colleagues and I have found that English as Foreign Language (EFL) students have problems with reading and writing skills in college for several reasons, including: insufficient first language (L1) and second language (L2) literacy backgrounds, lack of prior knowledge in various subjects, limited experience with active reading, and sometimes a negative attitude towards the value of academic reading and writing (Al-Issa and Dahan 17).

Prior knowledge seems to be one of the major reasons for the difficulties learners face with reading and writing at university. Our students have limited prior knowledge in fields and subjects that we would ordinarily assume they would have gained during high school. When discussing students' prior knowledge, I refer to their familiarity with subject matter, strategy knowledge, world, personal