

Understanding Students' Experiences in Writing-Intensive Courses

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Abstract

Students' ability to be effective writers is paramount to their success in the workforce. The purpose of this qualitative study was to use focus group interviews to understand students' experiences in and attitudes about writing-intensive courses in two social science departments in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. Fifteen students from the Departments of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications participated in three focus groups. All participants had taken at least one writing-intensive course. Four prominent themes emerged: definition of writing, writing instruction, critical thinking and learning and writing-intensive course experience. Students claimed not all writing-intensive courses are effective. However, courses that provided students with opportunities to immerse themselves into a writing-rich environment while learning effective ways to portray thoughts, acquire the diction of the discipline, overlook superfluous information and be specific were effective. Courses with repetitious, project building assignments and feedback at regular intervals helped students become effective writers. Improving students' writing abilities is more than just stating criteria and implementing the criteria in the course. More research needs to be conducted on the teaching methods and writing assignment that help students become effective writers who can analyze information and think critically.

Introduction

Effective writing is paramount to students' success in their personal and professional lives (Motavalli et al., 2003; Reynolds, 2010; Strachan, 2008; Zhu, 2004). Students use writing as a process to discover, develop and disseminate scientific information and ideas (Foster, 1983). It "promotes discovery of linkages among existing ideas, the reshaping and reorganization of old ideas and the creation of new ones" (Ryan and Campa, 2000, p. 175). However, students often times find ways to avoid

writing because of the difficulties and struggles that accompany the process (Davies and Birbili, 2000).

In an Australian bachelor of agricultural science program, students reported they were concerned about paper structure, finding information and reactions of their audience but had specific issues with thinking critically while they write (e.g. making arguments, reviewing and describing all sides of an issues and critically reviewing information; Tapper, 2004). In contrast, Huang (2010) wrote that students believed their writing issues were more surface-level (e.g., sentence structure and organization) than discourse-level emphasizing their continued need for support and instruction in those areas. Further, Bok (2006) indicated that improving students' writing would require student/faculty interaction with one-on-time devoted to helping students develop fundamentals and address specific issues, more frequent writing assignments and in-depth feedback from faculty.

In the theory of education and identity, Chickering and Reisser (1993) explained that undergraduate students develop intellectual and interpersonal competence related to written communication during college. Pascarella and Terenzini, in 1991, found that students increase their intellectual ability to more effectively communicate (oral and written) by an average of 19 percentile points during college. Intellectual competence, as defined by Evans et al. (2010), is the "acquisition of knowledge and skills related to particular subject matter" (p. 67). Chickering and Reisser (1993) contended that for students to analyze a situation they need to learn more about the subject area because, as Epstein (1999) explained, students' ability to master, understand and engage with a topic in their written work reflects their subject knowledge.

Likewise, Foster (1983) described writing as a critical element in students' self-discovery, self-development and social maturation. Students actively develop their ideas, questions and opinions while critically observing

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and reflecting on their own thinking (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Students' ability to understand new information and communicate it effectively is critical to developing intellectual competence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). As students become more intellectually competent, they engage with the course material, are able to see both sides of a situation and make adequate conclusions based on their observation and analysis (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Additionally, students develop interpersonal competence as they learn to effectively communicate and collaborate with others (Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010). Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Klemp (1977) stated that interpersonal skills are paramount to students' success in personal and professional relationships. Students who have developed interpersonal competence have an increased ability to listen to others, ask questions, contribute to conversation without misleading the group and effectively facilitate group dialogue (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Moreover, students are interpersonally competent when they can choose the correct timing, medium, audience, content and source to achieve specific communication goals in both their personal and professional lives (Breen et al., 1977).

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to use focus group interviews to understand students' experiences in and attitudes about writing-intensive courses in two social science departments in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. Three research questions guided this study:

1. How do students define writing?
2. What are students' experiences in writing-intensive courses?
3. What writing factors help student writers become more effective?

Method

Texas A&M University's more than 45,000 undergraduate students are required to take one writing-intensive (W) course (focused on written communication) and one communications-intensive (C) course (focused on oral communication), or two writing-intensive courses as part of the Communications-in-the-Disciplines program. Courses, however, may be taught by teachers who are not trained to teach written communication. W courses were implemented for students to learn how to communicate in written form using practical writing assignments representative of the types of writing they may do in the workforce. Students should use the skills they gain in writing-intensive courses to solve problems and communicate more effectively and efficiently about their disciplines (Texas A&M University Writing Center, 2014). Course criteria includes providing writing assignments related to students' majors, integrating instruction and feedback that gives students the opportunity to improve their writing assignments and requiring students to write a minimum of 2000 words. Writing should be used as a method of learning course content and inspiring students to be creative, use critical thinking skills and take ownership of their writing (Texas A&M University Writing Center, 2014).

Qualitative focus group interviews were used in this study as a nondirective form of interviewing that redirects the attention to the respondent (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Focus groups "reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would be not as accessible without group interaction" (Morgan, 1997, p. 20). In focus groups, participants may more openly share their opinions, thoughts and experiences because the group participation allows for more natural conversation and interaction (Myers et al., 2011).

The students (Table 1) recruited for this study were majoring in agricultural business, agricultural economics,

agricultural leadership and development and agricultural science in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. The population was limited to the social sciences, defined as institutions and functions of human society and relationships, within agriculture because of the broad scientific disciplines and the variety of writing contexts in agriculture. Each student had completed at least one undergraduate writing-intensive course at Texas A&M University at data collection, January 2013. Agricultural communication and journalism students, though, did not participate in the study because writing is the core component of their program of study.

Table 1. Student Demographics and Writing Intensive Courses Taken

	Focus Group One (n = 6)	Focus Group Two (n = 6)	Focus Group Three (n = 3)	Total (N = 15)
Gender				
Male	2	5	3	10
Female	4	1	0	5
Major¹				
Agricultural Business	2	1	0	3
Agricultural Economics	0	2	0	2
Agricultural Leadership and Development	4	3	1	8
Agricultural Science	0	1	2	3
Expected Graduation				
2012	0	0	2	2
2013	5	5	1	11
2014	1	1	0	2
Courses Taken				
Agricultural Policy	2	4	0	6
Clinical Professional Experience in Agricultural Science	0	0	2	2
Designing Instruction for Secondary Agricultural Science Programs	0	0	2	2
Fundamentals of Agricultural Economics Analysis	1	4	0	5
Leading Change	3	3	1	7
Survey of Leadership Theory	4	1	1	6

¹ One student was a double major in agricultural economics and agricultural leadership and development.

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Fifteen students agreed to participate in one of the three focus groups and all participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the study, which was approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board. Participants were identified using a purposive sample, sampling of participants with the research goals in mind (Bryman, 2012) and recruited through email and face-to-face methods. Once the focus group participants were identified and agreed to participate, a follow-up email was sent thanking them for agreeing to participate and reminding them of the date, time and location of the focus group. The day before the specified day of the focus group, a reminder email was sent to the participants (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Prior to beginning the focus groups, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire that included gender, major, graduation year and writing-intensive courses completed. Focus group one had six students, focus group two had six students and focus group three had three students. Only three focus groups were conducted because data saturation was achieved (Krueger and Casey, 2000). A moderator conducted the focus groups and an assistant moderator observed the focus groups while taking notes related to participants' comments. Questions were related to students' definition of writing, description of the writing-intensive courses in their disciplines, experiences in writing-intensive courses and perspectives of writing factors that augment critical thinking and create knowledge.

Focus group data were transcribed, coded and analyzed based on Krueger and Casey (2000) and Lindolf and Taylor's (2011) recommended procedures. Each participant was given a code that included focus group (F1, F2, or F3) and a random corresponding number. Focus group analysis is a continuous process that begins with the first focus group and continues through the duration of the data collection (Krueger and Casey, 2000). After each focus group, the interview protocol was revised as necessary. The data were inductively analyzed using the Krueger and Casey (2000) long-table approach, arranging comments and quotes according to themes that emerged from the data, to gain "understanding based on the discussion as opposed to testing a preconceived hypothesis or theory" (p. 12).

Triangulation (cross-checking) was achieved through focus groups, moderator and assistant moderator dialogue, field notes and data collection using other research methods with similar populations because "the use of multiple forms of evidence can bring us closer to a 'true' representation of the world" (Lindolf and Taylor, 2011, p. 274). The protocol questions and students' comments and statements were used as a framework for the narrative (Krueger and Casey, 2000). An audit trail of initial analyses, field notes and exemplars was kept to maintain dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

Although students' experiences are not the only way to investigate a writing program, they provide a unique

perspective. Sometimes students' dislike for a certain curriculum goes beyond the importance and significance of the curriculum to students' long held opinion about that field of study. Therefore, it is important to understand students' experiences in and attitudes about writing-intensive courses in social science departments in colleges of agriculture from a qualitative perspective. Four prominent themes emerged from the focus group data—definition of writing, writing instruction, critical thinking and learning and writing-intensive course experience.

Students within the focus groups collectively defined writing as the act of communicating information in a clear, cohesive message with organized synthesizing and collaboration of thoughts (F105, F201, F104, F106, F101). Writing is, essentially, documenting and creating a world that was not otherwise known. It is a skill that is not learned overnight or in one class, which was also noted by the Texas A&M University Writing Center (2014) and Young and Fulwiler (1986). Students have varied definitions of writing and anecdotal evidence shows that some students view writing as nothing more than using correct grammar or having neat handwriting, which, based on evidence from this study, is a skewed definition of what the infinitive verb "to write" means.

Students said a specific definition of writing depends on the context of the writing task (e.g., creative writing and academic writing; F203). Beyond context, students believed writing for social science disciplines in agriculture is expressing thoughts, messages, or points of view in an organized, concise manner using a layering process to build on ideas and add information to the structure of the work (F102, F105, F106). "*You have to keep at it. One photograph does not make you a good photographer. [It is] the same with writing. To be good you have to have feedback and build on it*" (F105).

Teaching strategies and delivery methods affect students' ability to become effective writers (F101, F102, F103, F104). Teachers should continue to push effective writing (F102) and writing repetition (F105, F205). "It is about quality over quantity" (F105). Provide clearly articulated examples of written tasks is one method teachers use to teach writing, but examples can hinder students' capacity to think creatively and excel in the classroom, which Davies and Birbili also found in 2000. Chickering and Reisser (1993) claimed that students should engage with the course material to become intellectually competent. Therefore, providing students with examples may keep them from fully engaging with the material and stifle them from developing intellectual competence.

Some students (F102, F301) believed that examples helped them become effective writers and that teachers did not provide enough concrete examples. "*I like teachers that show me a good example of what they expect. Even if it is different, show me what you want*" (F301). Courses with examples are easier because students can research and complete their project more effectively when they know what is expected. "*I like it*

to be spelled out. It is easy when it is spelled out, but it doesn't produce the best paper." (F205). When students have specifications to guide their writing, getting started and continuing the process becomes easier, which is a characteristic of unskilled writers (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987).

However, F104 said she preferred broader requirements because specific examples and requirements decreased her motivation to do research. "We did not get one example of a 150-page paper, which was overwhelming at first, but then guidance wasn't necessary. Not all groups excelled without guidance, but ours did. We had a plan of attack, but some groups did not" (F101). An example of a completed paper with a strongly developed argument may cause students to confine their work to the walls of the sterile box because they try to develop an argument that is a mirror image of the provided example. This could potentially stifle students' ability to master, understand and engage with a topic (Epstein, 1999). "I didn't excel in classes that had formats. Without examples, I am not tempted to follow a format. My work is more original and creative without examples" (F101). Additionally, "Having examples hindered my creative thinking. I work better in no example environments" (F106).

On the other hand, teachers can provide guidance without providing specific examples. First, they can assign students reading in their disciplines to provide examples of well-written documents without confining students' work to a box. Second, they can provide rubrics that address the requirements of each section of the project (F201, F206). "I guess it depends on what you are comfortable with as a student and a professor. Slight rubric with just enough guidance or lots of interaction with having the option of the professor looking at it. Writing concept is subjective and rubrics provide points. Without them, it [writing] is chatter" (F201).

Furthermore, repetitious, project building tasks are effective writing assignments, which Strachan also stated in 2008. Students learn more from writing tasks when they can develop a project through the semester and combine different writing tasks to make a complete project. "Working on a project all semester is better than short assignments" (F202) and "doing research and writing until you have a project helped me learn about my project and about writing" (F204). The amount of time students spend writing can impact how much they learn in a course and how much they improve as writers. Chickering and Reisser (1993) claimed that writing helps students develop their thoughts and ideas while reflecting on their own thinking. Writing in intervals helps students to master writing skills and develop as effective writers. Feedback must be provided in a timely manner throughout the semester if students are to learn from their mistakes and improve on the next assignment, which Strachan (2008) found to be true as well. Providing feedback at the end of the semester does not help students become effective writers.

Although writing-intensive courses helped two students become critical thinkers (F101, F106), the courses did not contribute to other students' ability to think critically (F201, F202, F204, F302). Writing assignments that make students think are the most engaging (F102), so perhaps, it is specific assignments that help students become critical thinkers and not the course material. Students (F203, F205) appreciated assignments that required them to research a topic and present the topic's opposing viewpoint because it helped them realize more than one view existed. "I still believe the way I did, but it altered my thinking some. My thoughts are closer to the middle than they were before the assignment" (F205).

Often times, students do not have the opportunities to defend their information (written or oral) because of large classes or teacher demands in other areas of the academy, which leaves students without the opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. One student (F101) said "when you write, you defend the information and when you have to defend the information, you have to know your stuff." If writing tasks do not incorporate components that require students to develop an argument or defend their position, it is hard for them to develop critical thinking skills. As Wilson found in 1986, students are more likely to think critically when writing argumentative assignments. Some of the students in the focus group, though, reported that they write with a stream of consciousness, which Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) said is representative of a writer who is unskilled and writes using the knowledge-telling strategy.

Writing-intensive courses, in theory, are mechanisms that assist students in becoming effective writers. According to the students in this study, some writing-intensive courses help students become effective writers and others do not, which might be because they do not receive the necessary feedback to improve their writing abilities. Each student has a different experience in writing-intensive courses. One student enjoyed writing-intensive courses but believed writing skills were not improved (F106). Whereas, feedback in writing-intensive courses did not help one student (F202) become an effective writer, but feedback in non-writing intensive courses did help her become more effective (F301). Improvement comes from specific feedback. When feedback is vague and only tells students whether their work was acceptable or not, it does not help them improve or build on their writing (F106).

However, writing-intensive courses do provide students with writing resources they can use as guides in the future (F301). "I want to be a lawyer or go into government relations, which are two of the careers more focused on writing. [It is important] for me to write, understand research and [form] cohesive sentences" (F101). Writing-intensive courses have helped students learn ways to effectively portray thoughts, learn the diction of the discipline, overlook superfluous information and be concise (F101, F103, F201). One student (F103) said writing-intensive courses provided her with writing

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opportunities that challenged her and helped her discover the vocabulary used in her discipline, but she does not feel confident writing about research. "I learned material because I wrote about it" (F106). These courses help students learn to research and develop thoughts about information pertinent to their career.

Recommendations

Improving students' writing abilities is more than just stating criteria and implementing the criteria in the course. More research needs to be conducted on the types of writing tasks that intensify students' ability to think critically. Instruments need to be developed and tested to determine which writing tasks help students become effective writers who can analyze information and think critically.

Foundational studies, such as this one, need to be conducted to develop instruments that measure educational effectiveness of the methods used to teach writing. Those teachers who teach writing but are not trained to teach writing may tend to avoid facing the writing crisis because writing is subjective and the ways to assess writing are not fully developed. However, if students are to become effective writers, then writing teachers and researchers need to develop robust ways to teach writing and to measure educational effectiveness.

Because students said writing depends on context, each department, or perhaps major, should develop a writing definition beyond that of what writing means to students in social science departments in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. Moreover, depending on the major, the definition of writing could be course specific. For example, agricultural communications and journalism students are required to take a variety of agricultural writing courses (e.g., media writing, public relations writing and technical writing), which are conceptually different. Whereas, writing in agricultural communications and journalism is contextually different than writing in agricultural economics.

Further, similar studies should be conducted with the bench science departments in colleges of agriculture. Just as Fulwiler and Young (1990) stated that writing instruction is not the same at all institutions, writing is not the same in all disciplines or all divisions within an industry. The results of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population because the study took place at a particular time with a specific group of people. However, it can be replicated at different institutions to determine students' perspectives of writing across colleges of agriculture and begin to develop a literature base that can be used to enhance writing instruction in agriculture.

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