

What Do Professors Really Say about College Writing?

In a follow-up to their previous English Journal article, the authors report on focus-group discussions about writing in which college teachers from across the curriculum participated. Implications for the teaching of writing are described.

In our January 2010 *English Journal* article, “Helping Students Cross the Threshold: Implications from a University Writing Assessment,” we showcase results of a large-scale writing assessment conducted at Central Michigan University (Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, and Kreth), arguing that some of these results are especially relevant to English teachers working with college-bound students and sharing classroom implications, such as writing assignments, textbook suggestions, and “writing principles” (Atwell). As a follow-up to that article, we here narrow our teacherly gaze from overall assessment results and implications to just one segment: the faculty focus-group discussions. In these focus-group discussions, faculty representing various disciplines, experience levels, and pedagogical views shared their views with us about college writing, including writing assignments, “good” writing, and pedagogical strategies—all topics English teachers routinely discuss in various professional settings, such as NCTE conferences, NWP institutes, and state workshops.

These focus groups, however, extend our current professional conversations because participants were professors across disciplines talking informally among themselves about college writing. Their academic shoptalk provides a dialogue to which most *EJ* readers do not have access, but in which they are very interested. In sharing their comments here, we strive to promote not automatic acceptance of them but, instead, teacherly reflection, further assessment, and ongoing conversation

about what our colleagues across disciplines say about student writing.

How We Gathered Faculty Responses

To provide a context for the faculty responses, we begin with a thumbnail sketch of our research methodology, with emphasis on the focus-group discussions. We began with questions: (1) How much and what kinds of writing do faculty assign? (2) What do faculty perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of their students’ writing? (3) What disciplinary preferences exist among faculty with respect to what they believe counts for “good” writing? (4) What pedagogical strategies, if any, do faculty use in helping their students become better writers?

After indentifying the questions, we distributed a universitywide survey addressing the four questions and inviting faculty to participate in the focus-group interviews as a follow-up to the survey. Once survey results were obtained, we contacted the faculty who had expressed interest in the focus-group discussions, and 14 faculty volunteered and participated, including representatives from five of our six colleges: Business Administration, Communication and Fine Arts, Education and Human Services, Health Professions, and Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences. Focus-group participants, each of whom self-identified as interested in writing and the teaching of writing, were divided into three focus groups: six in the first group and four in the second and third groups. Each focus-group discussion lasted approximately one hour,

and all four researchers were present for each interview. With faculty permission, we tape-recorded the questions and responses, producing over 50 pages of transcribed text for analysis.

Focus Groups Responses: What Participants Said about Writing

Our faculty participants shared a view of writing as developmental, and they commented on their strategies for encouraging growth over a student's college career. They also revealed the disciplinary

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differences that cause definitions of "good writing" to vary. Still, it is clear that regardless of discipline, the faculty participants in our study valued a kind of complexity of thought that first-year college students usually have not yet developed. Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue call this "difficulty" (1) while Gerald Graff and Cathy

Birkenstein refer to it as "tying it all together" (17). According to Graff and Birkenstein, the complexity of thought is a combination of "connection and coherence" and the art of metacommentary (17, 99–123). In looking at the focus-group comments in three overlapping categories—Writing Assignments, Reading and Managing Source Material, and Learning to Write—we see this theme of *complexity* playing out in relation to the following topics: the importance of reading, the value of summary and critique, the role of managing source materials, and the need for taking intellectual risks.

What Did Participants Say about Writing Assignments?

EJ readers may be interested to learn that not one professor mentioned five-paragraph essays or "traditional" high school research papers in the focus-group discussions as essential in college writing. Not as a standard academic form. Not as a stepping stone. Not as an organizational strategy. Although our survey results suggest that an in-class essay is the most common writing requirement at our institution, two of the most common writing assign-

ments (that is, writing that is generated outside of class over some period of time) are critical analyses and research-based writing. Focus-group comments reinforce this view and extend it in two ways: the importance of intellectual risk taking and disciplinary difference.

Writing Assignments

Assignments that ask people to—in their own words—to lay out an author's argument, to describe a piece of writing, to somehow boil it down into a couple pages—that's just an essential kind of thing, and [students] have to be able to do it, and it's one of the things I try to do.

[I assign] one- to two-page written essays for every class meeting and [it's] always on the reading assignment [for the day]. And I start off with simple things, like summaries, because students can't do that.

I [assign] two book reviews. Well, I call them "book critiques."

Three times during the semester they have to turn in article critiques of the assigned reading. I just tell them I want three paragraphs—one paragraph of content (brief), one paragraph of why this article is important to the profession, and one paragraph on what they think of the article (their comments on the article).

They're reviewing eight articles the first time, six the second time, and five the third, so they really have to do a lot within that assignment.

I just say, "Pick a concept, an idea, or even facts that we have dealt with in class, and talk about its connection with this [or that] author's ideas."

Intellectual Risks

I see that in all my classes [students saying], "We're not going to think, and we're not going to think anything different. Just tell us what we need to know and we'll try to do that."

If students are trying to write their paper the night before it's due, or at two o'clock in the morning, it's really difficult to get them to think. Many times I read a paper thinking, "This person knew exactly what they wanted to talk about but they were either in a rush or they just couldn't put everything together."

Many—not all—but most of my students tell me that to them this [class] is a hoop to be jumped through so they can graduate and someday go out and be a real social worker, and that being a social worker doesn't start until one graduates and gets a job. So the classroom is not seen quite so much as being [a place for] a social worker in training.

I offer to read them [i.e., preliminary drafts]—I've had one or two that have turned in drafts and asked me to look them over first. But they seem to think that I should give them an "A" [just because they turned papers in for review.]

Disciplinary Differences

One of the things that I notice is that students do not have a sense that there are differences, that writing expectations are going to be different for different disciplines.

I wouldn't have structured the class quite the way I did if I had realized I was going to have as many students outside of the discipline.

Summary

The focus group comments extend survey responses in which faculty indicated that they commonly assign critical responses and other research-based writing. First, the focus-group comments suggest that college writing asks students to read and write about previously unfamiliar topics as a way to learn course content. Though we know from our work outside the English department and across campus that students may have a choice in topic selection, topics tend not to reflect or explore personal beliefs, views, or opinions—except as they pertain to the course concepts or the discipline in question. Second, faculty comments suggest that professors value intellectual risk taking. As such, they want students to use writing assignments as venues to explore complex questions or issues and, most importantly, to challenge themselves intellectually when they write.

As a field, we naturally value—and will continue to value—a wide range of writing assignments and genres: everything from stories, poems, and memoirs to newsletters, résumés, press releases, and, more recently, digital stories, blogs, and wikis. However, focus-group comments remind *EJ* readers that we should reflect thoughtfully about and not

underestimate the value of summary and critique, especially as a writing-to-learn strategy, because they challenge students to tackle complex intellectual tasks and take intellectual risks with previously unknown topics, concepts, and genres.

Because preservice teachers at our institution sometimes dismiss summary as "boring," a task requiring no creativity and little effort other than regurgitation, we propose here that summary is more accurately characterized as complex, recursive, and even an act of discovery. Indeed, a summary requires a close and accurate reading, including the ability to discern the author's main point and then to relay that point objectively and fair-mindedly either (a) to report precisely the author's content or (b) to foreground key elements as background for a subsequent argument (see Graff and Birkenstein for a discussion of two kinds of summaries [28–38]). *EJ* readers know that critiques can take many different shapes and forms; however, college professors tend to favor critiques promoting complex analyses and intellectual risk taking. To promote such complexity, instead of asking students to critique the print and film versions of a literary work by describing three differences between them, *EJ* readers might prompt students to delve deeper by critiquing a single difference, determining how that difference significantly influences the narrative progression, especially conflict resolution. The latter task calls for a more rhetorically complex critique that would challenge students to take intellectual risks.

What Did Participants Say about the Importance of Reading and Managing Sources?

Faculty at our institution generally agreed that the purpose behind most writing assignments is to help students learn class concepts and, further, that assignments either foster or require an ability to read, understand, and manage source materials. Consider the following comments as further evidence for these important writing skills.

Understanding Citation Style

What I usually do is I let them use MLA style in the 100-level classes because most [of my students] are not [Sociology] majors.

What I'll typically do is to try to explain to them why we use Chicago Style in history. And then I lay down the law and say, "This is what we do in this class."

I use APA style, which is standard for social work.

Every student that comes to take my Intro to Recreation class now receives [a] handbook [about writing guidelines]—that and we use APA style. We just agreed on that across the department, [that] everyone's going to use the same style.

Finding and Evaluating Sources

A lot of students say, "Well sure, I know how to research it at the library," but they really don't.

To most students, secondary research means that you go collect a bunch of stuff and put it together.

Students have little sense of the difference between a magazine and a journal or, now, things that they can find anywhere online, and they have no way of sorting through all that.

Online stuff. I have a rule that students can't use it if there isn't a date.

Reading, Understanding, and Incorporating Sources

I think a lot of poor writing comes from poor reading.

I teach students reading strategies, [such as] finding the subjects in paragraphs.

I have selected primary documents and my aim in those documents is to help them to draw some meaning out of those documents—to understand them on their own terms, to contextualize them, and then on to development and interpretation—typically around a question that I pose.

I was trying to teach how to use peer-reviewed journals because we have this big push in social work for evidence-based practice, so part of it is critiquing research and part of it is bringing information from the literature and the research studies into their papers.

I teach mostly upper level students—juniors and seniors—and I see a disconnect for them. They can read [a source], they seem to understand what it is about, but they really have a hard time making the connection and being able to say, "Okay, I've analyzed these three articles, this is the main theme, these are the things I'm seeing," and being able to articulate that.

Plagiarizing

Some students [plagiarize] by taking [text] off the internet, thinking we can't find it when there are so many [plagiarism programs] out there.

If I give any type of assignment that needs background information, they go to the internet, copy it, paste it into their papers and don't write it.

The student just simply went to a federal site, downloaded everything, and took out the annotations between the paragraphs—everything [else] was exactly the same.

Summary

Focus-group comments reinforce just how important it is for students to manage source materials when it comes to college writing. This may come as no surprise to *EJ* readers; however, the degrees of complexity that the various skills require are worth highlighting here.

On one level, there are concrete and distinct tasks, such as choosing the appropriate citation style depending on disciplinary conventions and/or the professor's preference and then writing correctly in-text citations and works cited pages. *EJ* readers know that these "nuts and bolts" tasks can be tricky for high school students to negotiate. However, these tasks are actually far less complex when compared to more complicated research considerations, such as evaluating the quality of source materials, summarizing and analyzing an author's main point and his or her biases, evaluating supporting evidence, and considering opposing viewpoints. Perhaps most puzzling to students, however, is how to incorporate source materials into their writing, either to provide supporting evidence or to generate a thesis. Both require students to synthesize material, to merge an author's (or authors') ideas with and/or against the student's interpretation and filtered through the disciplinary lens of the course in question. At the least, focus group comments suggest that students would benefit from recognizing the varying range of necessary skills associated with managing source materials, with special emphasis given to the more complex skills. In addition, they might be encouraged to imagine research as something more than taking a stand—usually "for" or "against"—on an important issue or debate and then using source materials as rhetorical ammunition.

tion to shore up or support their personal perspective (often ignoring source material that doesn't support their preconceived position). Instead, conducting secondary research provides an opportunity to learn gradually and over time how to ask genuine, even knotty, questions about important topics introduced in a course and then to puzzle out not THE ANSWER but, instead, various answers that might address the question, depending on ideological biases and perspectives; or raise more genuine and knotty questions for further consideration.

What Did Participants Say about Learning to Write?

Focus-group comments also reflected a developmental view of writing growth. In other words, faculty in our focus group understood that students don't arrive on campus as fully competent college writers, nor do they believe students will learn everything they need to know about writing in First-Year Composition.

Adjusting to College Writing During the First Year

Some of those freshmen at 8:00 in the morning don't have very good attendance habits, so they have these strikes against them before it has anything to do with actual writing.

Getting students to follow directions is a huge first step, especially when 70% are freshmen.

I never start a freshman class without talking about how they are going to use writing in the future, including other college courses.

Benefiting Over Time from Feedback and Guidance

I let students [see my rubric] ahead of time, so they know what they will be graded on.

I have a very good example—a model paper. I took a student paper, got permission, then fixed it up a little so that it's more correct, and stuck it on my website so students have a way of checking out an example.

I think a lot of students are scared to death of intellectual effort and generating ideas. So for me, part of that important process is helping them feel safe and encouraging them in a number of ways to just take a risk.

I also will review copies of papers ahead of time for those that really want to work on their writing skills.

I spend at least a class period or two going over how to write themes and goals and objectives that are measurable, and they struggle with that, even when I tell them the objective words I want [them] to use are “identify,” “list,” and “describe.”

I wish there was a way of monitoring students over time, for their own benefit.

Understanding Writing as a Developmental Craft

Students don't understand that writing is a craft that you improve and you're constantly improving and that it's not as if you can write or you can't.

It's sort of like a one-shot presentation on HIV and expecting people to change their behavior. I mean you've got them for a semester, but [students] need [writing instruction] in a repeated fashion.

I emphasize [writing] as a skill—this is a skill that you are learning, like painting, or driving, or playing the violin. You just have to practice.

Summary

Overall, focus-group comments supported “common sense” strategies that foster growth: (1) attending and being attentive in class; (2) using model papers, rubrics, and other supporting materials; (3) following assignment guidelines; (4) beginning papers early enough to discuss them in office hours; and (5) being not only receptive but also responsive to faculty feedback. These strategies will come as no surprise to high school students or their teachers. However, the focus-group comments also suggest that graduating high school seniors should combine the previously mentioned strategies with the right mindset toward writing, especially writing growth. More specifically, they should understand that when they arrive on campus, they won't know everything when it comes to college writing—no matter how good their grades were in high school, no matter how well their teachers taught them. Instead, they'll arrive at college and then “*continue to grow as writers . . .*” as they constantly face new literacy challenges in unfamiliar academic terrains. This growth is likely to be recursive in nature; it will naturally take the shape

of ups and downs, forward and backward steps (and even leaps), and successes and 'interim failures' (Gregory 76) as they transition from high school to college writing and beyond" (Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, and Kreth 47–48; emphasis in original). This idea might be unsettling to some students, particularly "straight A" students who regard the academic enterprise not as a process or journey of discovery, but as a game or hoop already figured out, *un fait accompli*.

Nevertheless, other students might be reassured and even comforted. Instead of feeling scholastic pressure to know everything, these students will take the long, reasonable, and more realistic view of a four-year college career. Yes, we often characterize college as a means to an end, a professional stepping-stone to a "good" job, a middle-class life, and the American Dream; however, college also provides an educational opportunity in the truest sense of that phrase: a time for personal transformation and growth. This transformation and growth has the potential to influence the student as writer. According to Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz, students who experience the most growth as writers, especially during the first year of college, tend to define themselves as "novice writers" (134), so they are most likely to understand that over time and with positive mentoring relationships, they will be guided toward becoming successful writers.

Three Implications

We hope our study prompts *EJ* readers to reflect on their composition pedagogy, especially as it pertains to college-bound students. More specifically, we predict that faculty comments have the power to reaffirm and support *EJ* readers' current classroom practices or to complicate and challenge them—or some combination thereof: How important is the five-paragraph essay or the standard research paper in helping prepare students for college? How often do I already incorporate summary as a writing-to-learn strategy? How do my classes and my department promote the idea that writing is a developmental craft? How complex are my writing assignments? What can be done to encourage intellectual risk taking among students? These are just a few examples of the kinds of questions *EJ* readers

might ask themselves and their department, school, and/or district colleagues.

Second, we hope our focus-group comments prompt *EJ* readers to rethink assessment in a more positive light. As Vicki Spandel points out, "ours is a nation obsessed with assessment" (93), and the September 2001 theme for *English Journal* is "Assessing Ourselves to Death" (see especially Virginia R. Monseau's "From the Editor"). However, assessment is not inherently negative. As we note in "Helping Students Cross the Threshold," a wealth of university assessment initiatives have recently been (and are currently being) conducted, and most initiatives are locally designed and implemented by teachers to characterize and improve classroom instruction and student literacy at their institutions—all honorable objectives. *EJ* readers could similarly conduct local assessments, and we suggest focus-group discussions as an especially productive strategy for data collection. For example, *EJ* readers interested in learning more about college writing across disciplines might invite recent high school graduates currently enrolled in two- and four-year institutions and representing various programs of study to participate in focus groups. Results would reinforce or extend those reported here, and they could be shared in a number of venues, including department, school, and school board meetings, as well as state and national journals, conferences, and institutes.


Finally, we hope that our focus-group comments help to broaden "writing pedagogy" discussion beyond English and English education teachers so that it includes teachers across disciplines. Because these teachers read different journals from the ones we read and are unlikely to attend our conferences, we offer as a starting point an innovative solution, especially to editors of NCTE and state affiliate journal or National Writing Project site communication outlets (e.g., websites, blogs, or wikis): Create a featured column about college writing. More specifically, we imagine a regular column that would be highly practical, a column that would showcase a specific writing assignment designed by a particular college professor and then include some kind of practical response, perhaps the professor's commentary about the assignment or a question-and-answer session between the professor and a high school English teacher. Regardless of assignment and response, the column would pro-

vide the opportunity for English teachers to read and analyze, over time, dozens of college writing assignments across disciplines, assignments that would otherwise not be readily accessible.

Final Words

Assessment results and the implications from our focus-group discussions bring to mind Kenneth Burke's well-known parlor metaphor:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. (110–11)

Like the newcomer in the metaphor, we hope that *EJ* readers will not only listen to the professional dialogue regarding college writing across the disciplines but that they will also “put in their oar” by sharing their own classroom practices, local assessment results, and teacherly perspectives in various teaching venues, such as NWP summer institutes, professional conferences, and future *EJ* articles. 

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Note

We wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of our earlier article who suggested that focus-group comments alone would be of tremendous interest to *EJ* readers.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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