

Retrospective Writing Histories
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Introduction

This study came about through a sequence of events beginning with administrative concerns about a perceived crisis in student writing and evolving into a collaboratively conceived, multi-campus writing research project. The University of California campuses operate in part as independent institutions but are also linked and controlled by system-level structures, both administrative and faculty committees. In the fall of 2001, the chief academic administrator of the UC system requested that the main faculty body (called the Academic Council) undertake a review of student writing, with a particular focus on the entrance requirement required of all UC-admitted students and the examination attached to it (known until recently as Subject A). During the course of that review, the Academic Council grasped the point that the entrance requirement assured the university only that students accepted for study at a UC had sufficient writing competence to *embark* on a course of undergraduate study, not that their competence was guaranteed in writing at every level and in every discipline—in some universal or permanent way. With that new understanding, the Council then wisely extended their inquiry into writing beyond the first year. They generated a useful set of questions, which they addressed to a group of administrators in charge of undergraduate education from each campus, about goals, expectations, and assessment of undergraduate writing, with a specific charge about the advisability of instituting a “gateway” writing exam required for graduation.

In their wisdom, the undergraduate deans and vice provosts, treating writing as an academic field of specialization rather than an already-understood common-sense practice, turned to the growing group of writing specialists in the UC's for their thoughts on these issues (at that time, there were eight tenure-track faculty in rhetoric and writing across the ten campuses of the UC system, although that number has grown). In response, writing faculty from four of the eight campuses convened to share ideas about how best to use this opportunity: to take it as an opening, a chance to educate people in positions of influence about writing research, to inform them about writing across the curriculum, writing development across the whole undergraduate career, and to influence their views about educationally sound modes of assessment. The main point of our response was that we could not responsibly recommend a single mode of assessment for students across the UC system when course sequences and requirements as well as staffing arrangements vary dramatically from institution to institution. In May of 2003, we proposed a "Staged, System-wide Study of Upper-Division Writing" and requested a budget of \$65,000 to begin. We didn't get the money, but we did get the opportunity to provide these undergraduate studies administrators with more enlightened ways to think about writing, and the opportunity to think and plan together. Out of that planning came the two interview-based studies of students—retrospective writing histories—to give us a picture of the paths students take through our various institutions. From these histories (smaller scale versions of the longitudinal conducted at Harvard and underway currently at Stanford), we hoped to get a sense of the strategies students use to move from course to course—what they take with them and what gets left behind.

Methods

Shevaun Watson (then Writing Consultant with the CWC office; currently Assistant Professor at University of South Carolina) and Susan Jarratt, UCI Campus Writing Coordinator, wrote a protocol narrative, including our list of interview questions (see Appendix A), and received Institutional Review Board approval for the study in the fall of 2003. We then randomly selected students from every seven of our nine schools (we were not able to get a participant from our smallest schools: Physical Sciences and Education) and achieved balance on variables of gender, native English vs. ESL, and “native” UCI matriculator vs. transfer student. Shevaun conducted one-hour interviews with 35 juniors in the spring of 2004, at the time they were taking or just completing our upper-division writing requirement, taught in the disciplines in a variety of ways (interview questions are attached). Katherine Mack, graduate student in Comparative Literature at UCI and Writing Consultant for the CWC in 2004-05, joined the project in fall 2004, and transcribed a number of the interviews. The three of us analyzed the resulting data. The following brief report presents our first attempt to identify themes in three areas: (1) writer’s processes and the relations between writing and thinking; (2) transferability of writing abilities from lower- to upper-division courses/intellectual development; and, (3) an issue we didn’t propose to highlight but that emerged in the students’ discussion and is of some interest in writing studies today: genre and modes of development.

Writing processes, writing to learn

The UCI undergraduates in our study demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of, or at least familiarity with, their writing processes. The majority reported engaging in pre-writing, drafting, and revision, techniques they learned from their lower-level writing classes. When

asked an open-ended question about their approach to writing, students referred to a range of strategies: “cloud and visual diagrams, the use of arrows to organize ideas, brainstorming, and free-writing exercises.” Even those who eschewed a formal process and instead preferred “just to start writing” spoke of composing as a process. For example, one senior history major explained that, instead of outlining, “[his] writing will come out and it’s pretty bad for two paragraphs or so and then it gets formulated at the end and I go back and switch and then fix the intro.” A cognitive sciences major describes a similarly recursive and process-oriented approach to his writing: “Usually what I do is I will write and I will read through it and then I will write some more and then I will read the whole thing over again, and then if I remember something that I haven’t put down, I will work it in. I have never written down an outline, I don’t know why. I am writing and revising the whole time.” Though these students may not produce discrete drafts for revision, they still view their writings as works-in-progress rather than finished products. The statement of a junior English major eloquently conveyed this conception of writing: “Writing is finding your own thought by writing it out---I guess that’s a recursive definition... that it’s a process, as much as product.” A social ecology student’s blunt statement rings equally true: “I usually try to get it right the first time, but it kills me because I know you can never get it right the first time.”

When asked about what they do when they’re stuck, the writers in our study likewise spoke of a wide range of strategies, from conducting more research and reading to talking with other students to breathing deeply, watching TV, napping, and exercising. Their comments suggest an understanding that the sources of writer’s block are varied and thus require different responses. Writer’s block can stem from a lack of ideas or knowledge, in which case additional information gathering is in order. One history major declared: “I definitely think further research

enables us to get past those blocks.” A different kind of problem--lack of clarity about organization--is ameliorated by a conversation with a friend, as a cognitive sciences major explained: “I usually can tell people what’s in my mind, but when I sit in front of the computer, and just [think] it won’t do the work and I know exactly what it is, so if I can tell somebody, then I can remember what I said, and then I can go back and write it.” Or the problem is simply mental exhaustion or information overload, a condition best overcome with diversions, as one biology major explained: “I’ll minimize the screen and play a game or something. Just try to clear my mind, don’t think about it. And then I’ll go back and I’ll reread the prompt, or reread the goal or the objective and try to find a new angle that I could talk about.”

These UCI students’ reflections about their writing processes and strategies to manage writer’s block testify to their acceptance of beliefs that we, writing studies specialists, have long held. They understand that writing, or more specifically, the process of writing, leads to the construction of knowledge. A history major explained with enthusiasm: “But then, what I do find is when I’m writing, about half-way though, I have the argument, whereas I may not have the argument at the beginning, but I don’t really care – I’m writing. When I’m mid-way through, I’m like, Oh, I just made the connection! Now I know why this paper makes sense.” An engineering major likewise reflected on the relationship between writing and deep understanding: “If you don’t understand it, it’s hard to write it, so in order to write it, you have to kind of think about it and understand it. So it forces you to sit there, and you kind of catch the parts that you don’t understand as much because those are the ones where you’re stuck, trying to finish the sentences.” Another engineering major reflected on her growing sense that writing is a mode of inquiry and an exercise in critical thinking and ethical decision making: “The writing courses helped me a lot because I think more now. Because when I look at something I will

analyze, I will take sides, I will put myself in the other person's shoes, and then think, 'Am I doing the right thing?' So then writing helped me in that aspect, as in I could critically think more. And then I learned to ask questions instead of being very stubborn and thinking, 'This is how it is and I know more.'" Our interviews suggest that the UCI undergraduates in our study did acquire the ability to practice and speak about writing as a process, and, perhaps more significantly, internalized the concept of writing-to-learn.

Transferability

Though the students in our study did acquire valuable knowledge about writing, it is also the case that many perceived a disconnect between the lower- and upper-division courses. One of the most interesting aspects of our study thus far centers on the issue of transferability of knowledge and skills, or the lack thereof, from one writing course to another. As you can see in our list of interview questions, we asked specifically about students' perception of the relationships among their required writing courses. This question implies that there are, in fact, clear conceptual and practical links between lower- and upper-division writing, but as writing specialists, we understand that composing is a highly contextualized endeavor that responds to the demands of particular rhetorical and disciplinary situations. Our query about transferability between courses deemphasizes contextuality. But we gained useful information by asking students to reflect upon possible connections—something they have not usually thought about before. In response, they offered an array of sometimes contradictory but often insightful statements about their writing experiences and intellectual development at UCI.

The issue of transferability is made all the more complex by the diverse range of writing courses students take to fulfill their upper-level writing requirement at UCI. All students must

take what's called a "W" course: an upper-division writing class often specific to a school or major. Variation among these courses derives not only from disciplinary differences—the numerous ways in which schools and majors configure this requirement—but also from pedagogical differences among instructors of the same course. One kind of "W" course common on campus is a content course within which writing is, to greater or lesser degrees, taught alongside disciplinary topics or issues. The more successful versions of these courses are those in which the writing is embedded in the teaching of the content area rather than simply added on to a preexisting curriculum. Another type of "W" course is a practical, technical-writing kind of class, common for engineering, computer science, math, and physical science majors. A third variation is a methods course wherein writing is taught as a component of the research practices of a particular field.

Given such variation, perhaps it is not surprising that many students in our study felt that their lower- and upper-level writing classes did not seem very meaningfully related to one another. One way students described the ostensible gap relates to those upper-division "W" courses in which writing functions secondarily and the "content" drives the course. In this case, students' perception of discontinuity has less to do with disciplinary knowledge than with absence of writing instruction. When asked about this, one student replied without hesitation, "[The "W" course] didn't feel like a writing class at all. No, it was a history class." Others complained that their upper-division course seemed like any other class in the major but with writing tacked on to it. "It just seems like a writing attachment," another history major explained. "[It would be better to do...] several 3 or 5- page papers throughout the quarter instead of just one [big] paper [at the end]. It just amazes me that so many points [for our final grade are on the paper], but we really don't talk about [writing] in the class."

Another way students described this gap is even more interesting. They identify the disciplinary differences that we want them to recognize, but they perceive these differences as a gulf that impedes the transferability of writing skills. One social science student explains it this way: “The kind of writing we do in psychology is very detached... you have to leave out all of your feelings [and] opinions... Writing in the social sciences is much more dry, but there is less subjectivity in it.... With the writing I’m doing now [in my major classes], the upper-division writing class has helped me more.... [Freshman writing] did not really transfer to my major.” Other students echoed this sentiment: “Definitely the format [in my major] is odd when you first come across it. That is really weird, but now I've got it down.... [the] language that you use is very ‘dry’ and straight to the point and it is not like descriptive writing. It is very different from Humanities and that was hard to learn.” An engineering student summarized the disconnect more succinctly in her assessment that first-year writing was “basically more of an English class.” Clearly this student perceived fundamental disciplinary differences between her lower- and upper-level writing courses, and more important, she and others understand such disparities as the cause of the lack of transferability. As one might expect, Humanities and Arts majors report a clearer sense of connection between first-year composition and the upper-level course.

The language of writing: Does remembering matter?

While the students we interviewed were articulate about writing process and disciplinary differences, many of them lacked a basic vocabulary well accepted across disciplines for modes of development and academic genres. If students don’t remember, or can’t reproduce the terminology for common academic writing practices, can they be said to have “learned” them? In a practice-based field, the case can be made for tacit knowledge, mobilized within various

contexts and in response to situated invitations to write. On the other hand, one could make the case that any continuity of learning across the highly fragmented and long-term process of university education must rest in a shared language carried from setting to setting. This sample of students did not convince us that we have succeeded in cultivating a pedagogical memory of writing terminology. Concerning the very basic distinction between summary and analysis, for example, a distinction emphasized strongly in our common first-year course and one that appears in many of the discipline-based courses, students were at a loss, at times even rejecting the helpful suggestion of the terms by the interviewer. Here are some examples:

- When asked about her writing assignments in the drama criticism course, a student would not accept the suggested terms “analysis” or “research” for what she was required to write. Rather, she said, it’s a matter of “bringing your own ideas into it and picking out hidden meanings.” This student hadn’t (yet) internalized such terms as “criticism,” “interpretation,” “review,” or “analysis.”
- A biology student taking the “W” course in the philosophy of science reported that they wrote “summary, but more than that.”
- Another biology student reported of a Women’s Studies “W” class that “we had to write, you know, what do you think?” to “pull the pieces out of an article” but also to “use references.”
- A student double majoring in biology and social science explained that in the first-year course, they read “stories” and had to “make a thesis of the book.”
- Finally, putting it most pointedly, a computer science student, when asked if anything from the first-year humanities course was applicable to his writing course in computer science, said, “Yes, but I can’t really describe it.”

Our results were mixed on this issue. Other students were able to talk competently about genres, mentioning research (the most common category), ad analyses, experience-based writing, journals, essays, lab reports, music reviews, synopses, and a whole range of business related forms. Indeed, a few offered very insightful comments students about the benefits of moving from genre to genre: comments that indicate students' ability not only to recognize the distinctiveness of generic categories, but their reflective capacity. An art major who could not identify her paper in a drama course as literary criticism nonetheless carried forward the idea of arguing a position from her community college course and felt that she had succeeded in developing the ability to arrive at an original interpretive position while remaining open to other positions. One of the most insightful comments on this issue came from a student who immigrated from Brazil only four years ago and spent much time in ESL classes. He took his second quarter of required composition in poetry-writing before moving on to technical writing in his engineering major. He valued the experience with various forms of writing, comparing the movement from genre to genre with learning a new language: "so you experience many kinds of writing and then you're more open and . . . the process of learning how to write the new format is faster because you already switched once. It is the same with languages."

Questions and categories for further analysis

A provocative theme that we have yet to pursue fully was articulated by students as the difference between writing as instruction and writing as (independent) thinking. Some expressed a desire for very explicit, step-by-step instruction; their figure for this method is "bang-bang-boom" (or "boom, boom, boom"). The students expressing this preference were majors in cognitive science and economics. But more often, we heard the students valuing something

more like guidance than explicit instruction. One of our best writers (a creative writer himself) praised his writing teachers for leading students to “guide [themselves].” Another student, a computer science major, criticized his first-year writing teacher by reporting that, if I “follow[ed] exactly what the TA said, I would earn a higher grade.” And a Social Ecology major, when asked what advice she would give to writing teachers, used a spatial metaphor: “[writing teachers] should allow more room for me to think about what I should do” rather than providing “answers and methods.”

Clearly we have much to learn from our students’ retrospective comments on their writing experiences. In the next stages of the project we hope to build new questions based on our preliminary interpretations and to increase our sample so as to get a fuller picture of UCI undergraduate writers.

Appendix A

Retrospective Writing Histories
Interview Questions

Name
College and major
First language/other languages
Matriculation status

Lower-division writing

How did you fulfill the lower-division writing requirement?

What determined your choice of Humanities Core Course or WR courses? If you opted for WR 39B, did you select 39C, 30, 31, or 38 for the second part of the requirement, and why?

What grades did you receive in these courses?

What did you learn in these courses?

How would you characterize your effort in these courses?

How would you characterize your experience in these courses?

Did you receive useful feedback from your writing instructors and/or from peers?

Do you think your writing improved as a result of having taken these courses? Why or why not?

Upper-division writing and writing in the disciplines

Have you taken the upper-division course yet? If so, which course?

What did you learn in these courses? Could you apply anything you learned in lower-division writing courses to this course?

In what other courses have you been assigned writing? What kinds of papers? (exploratory, argumentative, research, etc.) How long? How many? Were you asked to revise written work in these courses? Did you receive narrative comments from the instructor?

Do you think writing in your major is easy or difficult? Why?

Do you get stuck when you're writing, and if so, what do you do? From whom do you get help?

What is your writing process? When do you get writing assignments done?

Have you ever visited a writing consultant at LARC or some other campus center for writers? If so, did you find it helpful? Why? If not, why not?

Overall student perceptions

Do you feel that once you graduate you'll be well prepared to write in the "real world" and on the job?
Why or why not?

If you could tell your teachers one thing about writing, or how they teach writing, what would you say?