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Preparing Local Students to Become College-Level Writers

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ABSTRACT

What is college-level writing and how should it be taught? This year-long qualitative study applied transcendental phenomenology to explore the perceptions of six American community college professors across disciplines about the characteristics of college-level writing in English and about alternative discourses allowed within their disciplines. Six faculty members from biology, economics, English, and mathematics were included. Each faculty member was interviewed for up to two hours, interviews were audio recorded, interviews were typed into transcripts, and transcripts were analysed using principles of transcendental phenomenology, a form of qualitative research. Results found that faculty members differed greatly in their perceptions of qualities of college-level writing both within and between disciplines. Moreover, faculty members outside of English—biology, economics, and mathematics—expressed more openness to innovative forms of college-level writing. Faculty members in biology and mathematics advocated for the acceptance of mathematical symbols, mathematical formulas, and scientific notations as a form of college-level writing that deserves to be recognized and accepted as legitimate. Faculty members from English were more traditional and consistent in their perspectives about the qualities of college-level writing. Nevertheless, important differences in perceptions among English faculty members were discovered, particularly with regard to the amount of formal style required in written papers. These qualitative research results are important because they problematize the concept of college-level writing in English across disciplines. The results underscore the need to view college-level writing in English as a diverse, localized activity. The author of this paper argues for dialogue among faculty members within and across disciplines about important principles of college-level writing and for greater flexibility in accepting college-level writing in its diversity. In English writing classes, students need to be challenged to adjust their writing to satisfy the wide range of expectations of readers within various college communities.

Keywords: college-level writing, transcendental phenomenology, American community colleges

Introduction

What is the best, most effective way to teach college-level writing in English? Before this question can be answered, it is probably advisable to understand more about what we mean by the term *college-level writing*. What is college-level writing and how should it be taught? More specifically, what is college-level writing and how should it be taught within the context of an American community college? This research explored answers to these fundamental questions by examining the perceptions of college-level writing of six faculty members representing multiple disciplines at a Midwestern community college in the United States.

Objectives

The concept of college-level writing was explored from the perspective of six faculty members representing various academic disciplines of an American community college. Knowledge of what faculty members believe to be college-level writing can assist compositionists in the development of appropriate curriculum for writing classes. This study built upon earlier work by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) at George Mason University (GMU), in which they explored the perceptions of university faculty members about important characteristics of college-level writing in an American university. In contrast, this study explored the concept of college-level writing within the context of an American community college to see how perceptions might be similar to, or different from, those discovered by Thaiss and Zawacki at GMU.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study at Prairie Community College (PCC), a pseudonym for the Midwestern community college where this study took place. These research questions, first presented by Jones (2016), are of equal importance and are as follows:

1. How do faculty members at PCC describe college-level writing? Do their descriptions reflect the descriptions of college-level writing presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) in their study at GMU?
2. How do faculty members at PCC describe multiple discourses? What are they? Who uses them? Under which conditions? How might these conditions be similar to, and different from, the descriptions found by Thaiss and Zawacki in their study at GMU?
3. What do faculty members of different disciplines at PCC describe as trends in college-level writing, according to their own individual perceptions?

Literature Review

Within the context of the United States, college-level writing has served several functions, each reflecting a perspective about its value and essence. The first to be examined in this paper is that college-level writing provides a means through which scholars in academic disciplines may communicate with each other in a culturally appropriate way about professional issues (Faigley & Hansen, 1985; McCarthy, 1987). Students who are working to establish themselves as scholars within their chosen disciplines write to communicate their learning of disciplinary concepts. Effective disciplinary writing is also valuable, because it demonstrates a scholar's legitimacy as a member of the disciplinary community. Adherents of this perspective believe in the importance of writing as a tool to demonstrate one's knowledge of important trends within a discipline and acceptance of shared values (Bizzel, 1982; Swales, 1990).

Another function of college-level writing is its value in communicating personal truth (Macrorie, 1985; Miller & Judy, 1978; Spigelman, 2004). College-level writing empowers scholars and students to write about issues of importance to them personally, about issues which may have relevance for those who seek to have a voice in higher education. Writing about the need for greater understanding of the needs of people from different walks of life who struggle to enter the academy would be examples (Bloom, 1992; Bolker, 1979; Rich, 1972).

A third function of college-level writing, related closely to the second, is the promotion of social justice for those who have been heretofore exploited by those who enjoy elite status in society, including within the academy (Berlin, 1982, 1988; Bridwell-Bowles, 1995; Edelstein, 2005; Shor, 1992). Writing to explore social norms and how they privilege some and undercut others is an example of this function. By extension, authors may argue for social

liberation of the oppressed (Beech, 2004; Bridwell-Bowles, 1995; Hindman, 2001; Robillard, 2003).

A fourth function of college-level writing would be to build social capital as a means for students and junior scholars to advance their ways up through the ranks of the academy (Bourdieu, 1984; Horner & Trimbur, 2002). By learning the conventions of academic writing, authors learn the tools they need to gain membership in disciplinary communities. Writing for assessment purposes and writing for publication would be examples of how writing for social capital works.

The appropriate function of college-level writing and the appropriate perspective about it are contested. In their 2006 study of college-level writing at GMU, Thaiss and Zawacki attempted to discover what faculty members at their university thought were the essential characteristics of college-level writing. After conducting extended interviews with faculty members and students at GMU, Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) presented three hypotheses about the essential qualities of college-level writing. They hypothesized that faculty members at the university level believe college-level writing to have the following characteristics:

1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer (s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.
2. The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception.
3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response. (pp. 5-7)

However, the study by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) was conducted at GMU, a research-focused American university. Therefore, the ability to generalize from their study about the characteristics of college-level writing in English for other faculty members in other kinds of institutions in other contexts, such as American community colleges, is limited. More research needs to be conducted to understand better the characteristics of college-level writing in various academic and socio-cultural contexts, including in international contexts.

Methodology

This study was conducted at Prairie Community College (a pseudonym), which is located near a medium-sized city in the American Midwest. Prairie Community College has about 300 full-time faculty members, about 600 part-time faculty members, and roughly 20,000 students, who attend both full and part-time. Six faculty members volunteered to participate in this study. They included one from biology (Carol), one from economics (Paul), three from English (Deseret, Karen, Marcia), and one from mathematics (Nicole). Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect privacy and to encourage candid responses to interview questions. Each participant was interviewed for up to two hours in the fall semester about his or her opinions concerning the characteristics of college-level writing. The interviews were audio recorded and later typed into transcripts for later study. In the spring semester, the researcher studied the transcripts using transcendental phenomenology to derive deeper understanding of the perceptions of the faculty members individually and as a group about the essence of college-level writing.

The researcher used transcendental phenomenology, a form of qualitative research, to investigate the perceptions of six faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing (Husserl, 1970, 1950; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). Transcendental phenomenology was highly suitable for this study because of the optimistic view and multiple procedures supporting it that empower the researcher to interview participants to understand a phenomenon from their point of view, with minimal interference from researcher bias.

The researcher began with the *epoche* process, more specifically with *phenomenological reduction*, a stage in which previous personal experiences, prejudices, and preconceptions with the phenomenon were identified and described in writing. The purpose of this exercise was for the researcher to take steps to recognize and to purge his mind of potential bias. In phenomenological reduction, the researcher studied written transcripts of interviews multiple times, then drafted textural (descriptive) and later structural (analytical) descriptions of events and meanings. In *horizontalization*, the researcher explored new perceptions of the phenomenon that were later written as topics, then as clusters of meaning. Once the clusters of meaning were established, the researcher developed an *individual textural description* of the phenomenon from the perspective of each participant. Following this, the researcher developed a *composite textural description* of the phenomenon for the entire group of participants. In the final analysis stage, the researcher applied *imaginative variation* to understand the deeper meanings associated with the composite textural description. In this stage, the researcher was looking for “meanings and essences,” not reporting of facts (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The final outcome of this work was to develop a statement that captured the essence of the studied phenomenon. This is known as the *synthesis of meanings and essences* and it was the final outcome, the final goal, of the transcendental phenomenological research.

Findings

The First Research Question

The faculty members at PCC communicated perspectives that were at times at odds with the three general hypotheses proposed by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) in their study of faculty perceptions at GMU. Textural-structural synthesis of interview data revealed that all six participants in this study supported the first hypothesis presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), as a result of their study of faculty perceptions of college-level writing at GMU. All six participants at PCC agreed with Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) that college-level writing would show evidence of “persistent, openminded, and disciplined” study. English faculty member Deseret summed up the sentiment of the group well when she stated, “It (college-level writing) is performance, it is bringing together writing with the maturing adult.” However, the six participants often disagreed about the features of the proper form of the writing performance. English faculty members Deseret, Karen, and Marcia viewed a five-paragraph essay or a research-based prose essay as a preferred form to show disciplined study. However, Paul of economics indicated a willingness to accept any prose format that would communicate clearly the learning of economic concepts. For Carol (biology) and Nicole (mathematics), the communication of “persistent, openminded and disciplined” study could include English prose or scientific or mathematical symbols. The advocacy for acceptance of mathematical and scientific symbols as a legitimate form of college-level writing was a finding unique in this study of six faculty members at PCC.

Most of the faculty members at PCC agreed with the second hypothesis proposed by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), that college-level writing would reflect “The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception” (p. 5). They mostly agreed that conclusions should be based upon careful, consistent, logical analysis of factual material and without emotional appeals. However, this sentiment was not unanimous. Karen of English claimed there was a place for passion in academic argument, as long as it was presented within the context of factual information. She viewed the inclusion of passion in college-level writing as a positive attribute. She stated, “I’m all for making personal connections with what you’re doing, that you tend to be more invested in what you’re doing, that your heart is more into what you’re doing.”

In principle, the six participants of this study agreed with the third hypothesis proposed by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), that college-level writing describes “An imagined reader who

is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (p. 7). Nobody said anything that would challenge the principle behind this hypothesis. However, there was considerable disagreement among them about how to decide what might be considered to be an acceptable means to present this information. Karen and Marcia of English stated that they would accept papers written as first-person narratives as legitimate forms of college-level writing. In contrast, Carol of biology, Brian of economics, Deseret of English, and Nicole of mathematics argued that college-level writing should not include personal experience or expression of emotional sentiment, as this could adversely affect one’s objectivity and judgment.

The Second Research Question

The six participants of this study at PCC, as a group, were more tolerant in their acceptance of alternative discourses as belonging within college-level writing. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) reported that GMU faculty members teaching in sciences tended to view personal writing, including use of the first-person pronoun, as a form that could jeopardize one’s college teaching and publication career. Some fields, such as history, nursing and anthropology, were more open to personal writing. Communication of partisan political argument as a form of college-level writing was also controversial among GMU faculty members. In this study at PCC, faculty members as a group reported great diversity in what they would accept as alternative discourse. Deseret of English was more traditional, indicating that she would accept writing that was written from an objective perspective, contained a clear thesis statement, included a synthesis of outside sources, and adhered to prescribed Modern Language Association format. She stated that she did not approve of personal narrative as college-level writing. In contrast, Karen of English said that she would accept personal narratives as college-level writing, but she would not accept poetry, drawings, symbols, and digital images as legitimate forms. Marcia of English said that she would accept poetry as a legitimate form of college-level writing, as long as it was accompanied with some prose text. Nonetheless, she would not accept drawings, symbols, and digital images as legitimate forms. For Brian of economics, college-level writing would include two-page short answers to his short-answer questions, but he said that he did not have any special guidelines with regard to form of the writing, just as long as he could understand what the student was attempting to communicate. Carol of biology and Nicole of mathematics were the most tolerant in their acceptance of alternative discourses. They said that they would accept prose answers, drawings, sketches, mathematical symbols, or scientific symbols as legitimate forms of college-level writing on their examinations. Nicole explained that mathematics is a language and that the best way to communicate a mathematical concept is through the use of mathematics, not through a translation in English prose.

The Third Research Question

The six faculty members representing various disciplines at PCC stated that there was a clear trend in student writing toward greater informality, both in terms of style as well as inclusion of content. Greater informality was also identified by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) as a general trend in student writing. In particular, Thaiss and Zawacki found that GMU faculty members preferred students to write in standard academic prose style, even when writing for digital media. Alternative ways of conducting academic research, such as ethnography, were becoming increasingly popular. Nevertheless, faculty members at PCC were more open to accepting informal structures of college-level writing. PCC faculty members all viewed greater informality as an undesirable yet inevitable trend in college-level writing, as in a lowering of academic standards to protect enrolment. In spite of this sentiment, two faculty members, Carol

of biology and Nicole of mathematics, claimed that at least one form of communication (pictorial representation of learning) had emerged as a new kind of writing and deserved to be acknowledged by the academic community. Carol of biology and Nicole of mathematics even suggested that use of drawings could more effectively communicate scientific and mathematical concepts than the use of prose alone.

Discussion

What might account for the acceptance of informality in writing, especially for PCC faculty members? No doubt, the use of technology was a contributing factor, at least in the perceptions of the faculty members studied at PCC. All six PCC faculty members identified text messaging, declining enforcement of grammar rules by teachers, and growing popularity of digital images as reasons supporting the rise of informality in writing. Yet, analysis of the data revealed another, deeper reason for why informality in writing was more likely to be accepted at PCC.

The Fourth Hypothesis

Analysis of the data uncovered a deeper reason for the growing tolerance of informal style of writing, especially at PCC. The faculty members repeatedly emphasized that they wanted their students to be able to master the essential content of their courses. They viewed this mastery as essential for helping students to enter into chosen professions in competitive fields. Therefore, to assist students to master the content of their courses, faculty members in fields such as biology (Carol), economics (Paul), and mathematics (Nicole) deemphasized the importance of formal writing in their courses. Rather, they encouraged students to learn and to communicate learning through any means necessary to show mastery of the required course material. For these faculty members, if a student could master content, and show mastery of it, through non-traditional forms of communication, that would be an acceptable form of college-level communication. As Bourdieu (1991) points out, those who intend to master social conventions to earn promotion must recognize that power comes not from language itself, but from association with the institutions that control the social opportunities. This insight informs us that what may be interpreted as acceptable college-level writing is not determined by English faculty members, but by those who hold the power to control the destinies of students who wish to enter into popular, promising academic fields. It may be that community colleges, with their traditions of open admissions, may focus more on helping students to learn course content expeditiously. Therefore, in a community college context at least, a mathematical proof written on a final examination may be just as much a legitimate form of college-level writing as a research paper completed in an English literature course. The determination of whether or not something is good college-level writing is based upon the perceived social value of the code, not by the form of the code or its adherence to prescriptive norms.

This realization prompted the researcher of this study to develop a fourth hypothesis about college-level writing, to complement the three put forth by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). The fourth hypothesis, originally presented by the researcher in Jones (2016), is as follows: *College-level writing demonstrates flexible use of printed words, symbols, or images to communicate complex, abstract ideas with enough clarity and precision to be understood by an expert audience.*

Importance of This Study

There are several important implications for college and university teaching. To begin, teachers of English writing need to be mindful of changing standards of what may or may not be acceptable as college-level writing. The construct of college-level writing is fluid. There is

important disagreement among colleagues within the United States about what, exactly, might be considered as acceptable college-level writing. Before the 1800s, college students in the United States studied Latin to communicate knowledge of classical learning, which was the focus of higher education at that time (Applebee, 1974; Halloran, 1975; Kitzhaber, 1990). By the end of the 18th century, English appeared in the curriculum as a language to be studied for academic communication. Eventually, for a period of time, the study of English literature became the focus of the college experience. More recently, technology continues to change our world, including the ways we communicate. A professor who attended graduate school writing on a manual typewriter may now be teaching students who have grown up reading and writing their lessons on a mobile device. The cultural implications are profound. No wonder faculty members in both the study by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) at GMU and faculty members of this study at PCC have noted the rise in informality in writing style. Just as smart phones have become ubiquitous, so has text messaging writing style among those who own them. Why would we think that text messaging style would not find its way into the prose that our students submit to us in assignments requiring college-level writing? Conventions change, reflecting the shifting realities of authors and readers. As teachers and researchers of writing, we need to be aware of the new realities. We need to keep up with the times.

The question is not whether writing will change as the result of continued technological innovations, but rather it is more a question about how it will change and how we may try to guide it. If we resist all change and attempt to teach English as if it were frozen in the age of the typewriter (or the fountain pen), we risk harming our students, our colleagues, and our professional growth. We need to be mindful that the word “google” (a word that did not exist in English until just a few years ago) is now a noun and a verb. More than that, it represents a major employer, an important investment, a technological innovator, and a social change agent. Likewise, with Google Docs, it is a change agent in the way we create, store, and send written messages.

How much change should we be willing to accept? Are we to toss out all of our previous conventions and standards? How will we know when we are no longer teaching college-level writing and, instead, we are just teaching rubbish?

One way to address this concern is to examine and apply, carefully, the wording of the fourth hypothesis of this study: *College-level writing demonstrates flexible use of printed words, symbols, or images to communicate complex, abstract ideas with enough clarity and precision to be understood by an expert audience.* There are four elements in this hypothesis that are relevant to the present discussion. These elements are (1) flexibility, (2) words, symbols, or images, (3) abstract ideas, and (4) expert audience. The key to understanding what is or is not college-level writing rests with the judgments of the last element, the expert audience. Authors who draft work for a professor who teaches in the marketing department may need to use a different style of writing and a different presentation form than for authors who draft work for a professor teaching in, say, philosophy or art history. Someone else writing for a science professor or a mathematics professor may choose to abandon written prose altogether and go with scientific or mathematical symbols to communicate an abstract idea. As long as the college-level abstract idea is communicated through words or symbols to the expert audience clearly and precisely, it may be considered as college-level writing. This does not reflect an erosion of standards. Rather, it could simply reflect acceptance of the complexity of our communicative needs in the world of contemporary higher education.

How are we to teach college-level writing to students in this complex, ever-changing, post-colonial environment? As this study suggests, we need to abandon the unrealistic goal of teaching students a fixed formula or model of writing, one that can be exported to a variety of different college-level rhetorical situations with success. The five-paragraph theme may help a

student to organize an in-class essay in a history course, but it likely would not help him or her to answer a question in a mathematics or chemistry examination. Undergraduate students need to be challenged in writing courses to draft different kinds of writing assignments, ones that would require them to write for vastly different kinds of situations and audiences, not just for professors who teach in one subject area. Teaching college-level writing skills based upon mass-produced textbooks created beyond the local socio-cultural, academic context would be problematic. Instead, compositionists might team up with local colleagues from other disciplines, inviting them to provide input into the kinds of writing assignments they might often require students to write. Another approach might be to teach students how to adjust their writing to match the needs of various rhetorical situations across campus. In a college-level writing course, the compositionist might show students different syllabi from various courses and talk with them about how to write for the expectations of the expert audience. Compositionists might organize students into groups to interview faculty members across campus about expectations concerning college-level writing across disciplines. The students could then be invited to deliver oral reports to the rest of the class about their findings and to write about their findings in a more formal, research-based paper. These exercises would be intended to show students how to adjust their writing to match the multitude of rhetorical situations in which they are likely to find themselves as they take their undergraduate courses.

Limitations

This qualitative study used transcendental phenomenology to explore the perceptions of college-level writing among only six faculty members at one Midwestern community college. Based upon this small sample size, generalizations about the nature of college-level writing everywhere cannot be ventured. Nevertheless, the disparate perceptions reported here of the six faculty members about college-level writing problematize the construct. Further research using surveys may produce results with statistical significance and greater opportunity to generalize about trends in the field.

Recommendations

More research needs to be conducted in various local contexts within the United States and beyond its shores for a deeper, more thorough understanding of the characteristics of college-level writing in its many situations. These research studies should include large, public universities, such as George Mason University, but they should also include smaller, lesser-known institutions, such as Prairie Community College. To encourage deeper understandings of the complexity of college-level writing as a construct, the results of this research need to be shared widely. Ultimately, faculty members within local contexts need to define for themselves and for their students what is appropriate, what is valid, as college-level writing. Appreciating difference in local needs may encourage local faculty members to assume more leadership responsibility in the development of writing curriculum, writing textbooks, admissions assessments, and course placement assessments.

Conclusion

This study of six faculty members at a Midwestern community college explored how college-level writing is a complex activity, as it involves the study of social, economic, and technological forces that continue to influence the content of global higher education. Determining what is or is not acceptable as college-level writing needs to be determined by stakeholders in local higher education communities. Local research into what constitutes college-level writing needs to be continued and shared.

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