Interdisciplinary Collaborative Scholarship: Focus on Academic Writing
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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Writing is one of the most common forms of assessment in higher education courses. Students struggle to transfer the writing skills learned in composition courses across disciplines (Thiiss & Zawacki, 2006) and/or recognize the ways in which errors in writing can significantly impact demonstration of mastery of disciplinary content (Currier, 2007).

This research is focused on identifying and addressing student academic writing challenges through collaboration between one teacher education professor and a writing center director. The purpose of this study is to use insights gained through analysis of students’ academic writing to improve their writing.

Research Questions:

- What are the most frequent challenges in students’ academic writing?
- What are the challenges to improving students’ academic writing and our practice?

**FRAMEWORK**

Academic Literacies (Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Street, 2006):
- As a move away from individual deficit perspective toward the focus on accumulation of our students into academic discourse and academic literacies

Principle of Symmetry (Pardoe, 2000):
- A conceptual tool to understand challenges in students’ writing, but also our own practices

Course-Based Writing Center Partnerships (Corbett, 2015):
- Developing “pedagogical synergy” between the classroom and the writing center

**METHOD**

This study examines a text corpus of student writing collected in 2015 and 2016 (n=141). The writing assignment examined is connected to a federal policy paper within the course focused on laws and regulations related to nondisciplinary discipline practices in K-12 schools. 2017 student writing samples will be collected following the instructional intervention.

Participants: students in a dual elementary/special education program

Setting: six sections of one course across two campuses with three instructors over two years

Writing Assignment:

The assignment prompts students to respond in writing to the following questions:

- (1) What are some of the most important ways in which a “Dear Colleague Letter” should help the K-12 schools/districts in formulating their discipline procedures?
- (2) Reflect on the ways you experienced discipline during your own K-12 schooling (personally or by observation); and,
- (3) Describe the disciplinary ways in which you would develop your own discipline procedures for your own (future) classroom based on what you have learned from the “Dear Colleague Letter”.

Procedures: (1) Independent analysis of a small sample to establish a coding framework; (2) over twenty variables emerged in students’ writing and included problems in the mechanics of language use as well as content related issues; (3) the twenty variables were recoded into six categories: usage/style, mechanics, grammar, content, sentence level, and coherence for the purposes of conducting correlations among variables.

Inter-rater reliability: based on 57% of the sample with 92% reliability.

**RESULTS**

Findings for Question 1: What are the most frequent challenges in students’ academic writing?

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**CONCLUSIONS**

Preliminary findings and analysis of results showed that the number of errors in language correlated significantly with the quality of expression of content. The content-related variables included: misspellings of the text, unsupported generalizations, and perhaps most problematic, providing information opposite of the intended test meaning, including factual errors.

The role of the writing center extends beyond instruction in grammar and mechanics, yet these concerns continue to impede student success in academic writing. Since the role of the writing center is shaped both by students’ needs and instructors’ course expectations, adequately supporting students in their writing requires writing centers to rethink traditional boundaries between the classroom and the center.

This study has implications for practice and continued study. Survey results indicated that students believed that the writing instruction designed in partnership with the Writing Center was helpful and that a consistent partnership throughout the writing process would be desirable. The goal of this continued research/instructional effort is to build a “sense of coherence-within-diversity” (Thiiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 139) of writing across the disciplines so that students can better transfer their writing skills to their expression of disciplinary content.

The outcomes of the first intervention are reflected in students’ survey responses; the outcomes of the second intervention will be completed based on the comparison of the experimental and control group writing outcomes in 2017.

**REFERENCES**


**RESULTS**

Findings for Question 2: What are the challenges to improving students’ academic writing and our own practices?

- Instructors (“in the discipline”) usually evaluate students’ writing based on content, while generally not teaching mechanical or language use skills.
- Consultants in the Writing Center provide support in a variety of lower order concerns, but are not necessarily familiar with the content on which an assignment is based.

“Actually, we usually learn as we go with the assignments in our appointments,” while the students think that we will “know what to do.”

— VC Consultant

The authors adopted a course-based instructional collaboration with the Writing Center. The instruction covered common errors and provided students with practical strategies for addressing these concerns. After, students were surveyed to provide evaluation of the instruction.

Students found the instructional intervention to be:

- 44% “...helpful, as an opportunity for me to learn about my own writing”
- 38% “...helpful in getting me thinking about writing instruction of my future students
- 18% “... would be helpful if we had more practice or more such sessions throughout the year”
- 0% “...was unnecessary because I am a good writer”