8-13-2007

An Emic View of Student Writing and the Writing Process

Michael Hass
Chapman University, mhass@chapman.edu

Jan Osborn
Chapman University, josborn@chapman.edu

An Emic View of Student Writing and the Writing Process

Running head: EMIC VIEW OF STUDENT WRITING

An Emic View of Student Writing and the Writing Process

Michael Hass and Jan Osborn

Chapman University

Abstract

This study uses student reflections of previous success in academic writing to guide instructors as they design writing assignments. Seventy-one students in five classes responded to a questionnaire designed to help them identify particularly successful writing experiences and reflect on the circumstances, strategies, and methods they believed impacted their success. Student responses to these questions were analyzed to identify broad categories or themes. This process produced an "emic" or insider's view of what constitutes successful writing assignments and writing process. The findings suggest that students self report their writing as successful when the writing assignment engenders engagement, commitment, collaboration, a systematic approach, and opportunities for external confirmation. Instructors can include these considerations as they plan the writing assignments for their courses. Discovering what student writers believe constitutes good writing and what strategies most effectively help them produce high quality writing provides an opportunity to design writing assignments that empower students to join the conversation in their discourse community. If faculty are aware of student perceptions of writing assignments and use those perceptions in assignment design, the products may be more satisfying for both student writers and faculty readers.

An Emic View of Student Writing and the Writing Process

Introduction

The mission statements of many universities refer to the importance of writing and its place in a liberal arts education. Although writing is universally regarded as important, faculty perennially complain about a perceived drop in writing skills among college students (White, 1985, p. xi). At the same time, students express a desire to improve their writing. In a ten-year study at Harvard, Light (2001) found that "Of all the skills students say they want to strengthen, writing is mentioned three times more than any other" (p. 54).

To address concerns about student writing, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) became popular in the 1970s. Writing Across the Curriculum goals were, in part, "influenced by faculty frustration over students' lack of writing skills" (Walvoord, 1996, p. 61). This "skills" frustration reflects a "reductive, fundamentally behaviorist model of the development and use of written language" (Rose, 1985, p. 341); a stance that prevails because faculty across the disciplines often think that writing should be "taken care of" in freshman composition courses. Weimer (1996) suggests that while the writing-across-the-curriculum movement changed the way college teachers think about writing, it did little to change how they teach.

We teach at a mid-sized private university built around an undergraduate liberal arts core offering a variety of professional graduate programs such as law, physical therapy and education. One author is a school psychologist and psychotherapist who teaches courses in psychoeducational assessment and counseling strategies in professional graduate programs in counseling and school psychology. The other teaches

composition and linguistics to undergraduates in the English department and critical theory and literacy in the School of Education. Despite the differences in our backgrounds we have developed a common interest in nurturing good writers. Like many of our colleagues we have become concerned with the quality of student writing, even among students whose traditional markers of academic competency are high. Our graduate programs are modestly well respected and those accepted have good undergraduate GPAs, high GRE scores, etc. The inputs, so to speak, are good. Despite this, students often struggle with writing.

We hear faculty talk about writing as if a student can be inoculated and have no more difficulties: “Why didn’t they learn to write in high school?” or “Why didn’t they learn to write in freshman composition?” Walvoord (2003) suggests that knowledge of students’ reflection on their learning is one way to counter this frustration. While the means to improved student writing can be viewed through many lenses, discovering what students themselves believe constitutes good writing and which pedagogical choices they perceive as most helpful to them in producing high quality written assignments widens the perspective on how this might be accomplished.

If postsecondary writing is to improve, a focus on faculty’s role in writing assignment design must be addressed. Bean (2001), for example, argues that the use of writing to promote learning does not occur through “serendipity” (p. 1); it will occur only through conscious effort. When writing is primarily used as a means to record what has been learned rather than as a means of student learning, the design of the writing assignment and assessment of the product often leave the writer out of the equation. Huot (2002) discusses this “notion of assessment as something done because of a deficit” (p.

1). Measuring content knowledge through writing is significantly different than designing writing assignments to help students join the conversation in a particular discourse community. Bean (2001) suggests that "writing means joining a conversation of persons who are, in important ways, *fundamentally disagreeing*" (p. 18), that "writing is both a process of doing critical thinking and a product communicating the results of critical thinking" (p. 3). Faculty across the curriculum design writing assignments with little understanding of the difficulties even the best writers may experience as they navigate the criteria—both stated and unstated—they believe will get them the highest grade. Frustration with the student product leads faculty to bemoan the writing skills of college students: "faculty blame the poor writing. . . on the deficiencies of their students, never even considering that a better question might have led to better writing" (White, 1985, p. 100). This connection between improved writing and improved design of writing assignments is not often, unfortunately, a topic of faculty conversation (Light, 2001, p. 51).

It is at the nexus of faculty and student understanding of writing assignments where real improvement in student writing may occur. Faculty awareness of student understanding of writing assignments is a beginning point. One area of focus to improve the quality of student writing has been student reflection upon their own work, considering what students do well and where they believe they need to improve (Black, Sileo, & Prater, 2000; Walvoord, 2003). Student focus on their part of the process certainly has value; however, this focus—with students reflecting more on what they have done to address an assignment than on how components of the assignment met their needs as writers—has not maximized the import of what student perceptions of the

writing assignments may tell faculty about lesson design as integral to student work as developing writers.

This study attempts to use student reflections of previous success in academic writing to guide instructors as they design writing assignments. Although student reflections have their limitations as data sources, they provide a missing piece of the picture of what constitutes good writing and writing assignments. In addition, it is important to note that although these recollections may not represent the past in some kind of "objective" way, several writers in psychology and psychotherapy have argued that they form templates through which we interpret present experience. These templates have been called "core beliefs" or "schemas" by cognitive behavioral psychotherapists (Mcquaid & Carmona, 2004; Young & Klosko, 1994) and "dominant stories" by narrative therapists (White & Epston, 1994). Whether "objective" truth or not, these perceptions shape future behavior and how students approach writing assignments.

Determining what students themselves think constitutes good writing and which pedagogical strategies are most helpful to them in producing high quality written assignments is at the center of this study. This change in focus—while slight—may prove useful to instructors whose interaction with student writing is often at the point of evaluation more than design of the writing assignment itself. Rather than focusing on evaluation of student writing as a means to improved written communication, the writers' intent is to focus on student perceptions of the writing process as a means to design assignments that improve the quality of written work. In creating more effective writing assignments, instructors can improve the learning environment, positively impacting student writing. This change in focus asks instructors to listen to what students say about

writing assignment design as a means to improve the design of future writing assignments in their discipline: "Instead of envisioning assessment as a way to enforce certain culturally positioned standards. . . we need to use our assessments to aid the learning environment for both teachers and students" (Huot, 2002, p. 8). The study asks students what *they* valued in previous assignments, instructor response, and products.

Hutchings (2000) discusses a taxonomy of research questions in the scholarship of teaching and learning. These types include "what works?" "what is?" "what could be?" and a fourth type that encompasses questions leading to the development of new models and theories. This research begins with the question of "what is?" and then moves into a discussion of "what could be" and how this information might be useful to others interested in using writing as a pedagogical tool, therefore encompassing aspects of what could be and the development of new models and theories.

At first, this study was not seen as a research project but rather a pre-writing pedagogical strategy. One of the authors and a colleague teaches a graduate level course for students in school counseling and school psychology, *Introduction to Counseling and Intervention*. This introduction has a particular perspective on counseling and working with people called "Solution-Focused Brief Therapy" or SFBT (DeJong & Berg, 2002). In contrast to more traditional approaches to counseling and psychotherapy that depend on the expert knowledge of professionals, practitioners of SFBT see their clients as experts about their own lives and value and respect clients' definitions of problems and goals. To accomplish this, practitioners strive to adopt a stance of respectful curiosity or "not knowing." Client reflection and self-assessment is valued over external evaluations.

Also, SFBT, like the Appreciative Inquiry approach to organizational development (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987) and the Strengths Perspective in social work (Saleebey, 1997), values strengths and resources over problems and pathology. An important idea in SFBT involves “exceptions”; simply put, exceptions are moments in a person’s life when a problem is either not occurring or is less severe. It is through the exploration of exceptions that sources of client strengths and resources can be discovered. From the perspective of SFBT, building solutions to problems from moments of strength is far easier for clients than to try something altogether different or outside their experience.

Another important theoretical tenant of SFBT is that the client is the “expert” on his or her own life (DeJong & Berg, 2002, p.18). A skilled practitioner of SFBT does not perceive her “expert” perceptions of a client’s life as more important than those of her client. The SFBT practitioner operates from a social constructivist perspective, and it is the goal of the therapist to explore and work within the client’s priorities and explanations. As Goolishan and Anderson (1991) explain, the goal is…”a collaborative process as opposed to a hierarchical and expert process. The therapist’s expertise it to be “in” conversation with the expertise of the client” (p. 7).

An important goal for this project was to bring the “expertise” of student writers into the conversation. This perspective makes moot the issue of whether students’ opinions about their papers and how they write them are “valid” or not. From the point of view of SFBT, all informants have their own validity.

One goal of the counseling course was for students to write a major paper on a topic relevant to the class. As a way of beginning the pre-writing process, the students

were given a questionnaire—"Reflections on the Writing Experience" (See Figure 1)—to help them reflect upon their experiences with writing and, building on the philosophy of the course, identify particularly successful writing experiences, identifying the circumstances, strategies and methods they saw as adding to the success.

Figure 1: Questionnaire

Reflections on the Writing Experience

Question # 1 – Think of the best paper that you've ever written. Describe it briefly below.

Question # 2 – What was good about it? How did you know that it was good?

Question # 3 – Describe the process or steps you went through to write such a good paper.

Question # 4 – What was different about this paper from other, less successful papers, you have written?

Question # 5 – What would it take for you to write a paper as good as or better than the one you have described? What do you need as far as assignment, time, length, discussions, and workshops?

Many students report anxieties about writing and care deeply about improving their writing (Light, 2001), and it seemed a situation rife with possibilities for the application of the principles of SFBT, including the identification of strengths and resources related to writing through the exploration of exceptions. The authors had collaborated on previous writing assessment projects and were aware of Huot's (2002) work in writing assessment collaboration: "The idea of writing assessment existing across disciplinary boundaries is probably not new, though there is little crossover of scholars and work" (p. 25). Collaboration across disciplines made sense and, with that in mind, further information was gathered from three undergraduate English courses.

The intent was to provide an insider's or "emic" view of student writing experiences. In anthropological and ethnological research, the terms "emic" and "etic" have been in common use since the 1950s (Pelto & Pelto, 1978, p. 54). Franz Boas (1943) expressed the "emic" perspective thus, "If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours" (p. 314). In this context, one who comes from inside a culture has an "emic" understanding of that culture while those who come from the outside and observe it using their own categories and systems of classification have an "etic" understanding.

Using verbatim texts of spoken language as their object of analysis, ethnographers such as Goodenough (1956) and Frake (1962) attempted to develop taxonomies of important semantic distinctions made by the groups they studied. Their goal was to determine how people interpret their experience from the way they talk about it.

The "etic" approach classifies observable phenomena according to an external system of analysis brought in by a visiting "expert" from outside the observed culture. It assumes that there is an objective reality that is more important than cultural perceptions of their reality. Eticists such as Marvin Harris (1976) focused their attention on detailed descriptions of observable behavior, starting with microscopic units of behavior and building to larger patterns. This, of course, has much in common with the way student writing is most often seen by instructors. Teachers of writing apply etic categories generally drawn from the literature of professionals who teach writing. This knowledge is then applied to the assessment and analysis of student writing with only limited knowledge of what the students think or of the "emic" point of view.

Although this study does not make use of the formal quasi-linguistic analysis proposed by researchers such as Goodenough or Frake, the intent is to discover how students themselves define good writing and effective writing processes, an emic view. This is fundamentally an inductive process that follows the guidelines for qualitative research proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) in their discussion of "grounded theory" and the suggestions of Seidel (1998) in his description of the Qualitative Data Analysis model. Seidel describes this process simply and elegantly as one of "noticing, collecting, and thinking about things" (p. 1).

Methods of Data Gathering and Analysis

During the fall and spring semesters of the 2002/2003 academic year, seventy-one students in five classes responded to each of the five questions on the questionnaire, making a total of 365 written statements. Forty-seven of these students were in theee undergraduate course while the remaining 24 were enrolled in two sections of a graduae course in the graduate program in Counseling and School Psychology. These handwritten statements were then entered into a word processing program to allow for easier reading and coding. In addition, student names were removed from the word-processed text to better protect the confidentiality of the participants and reduce any bias coming from knowledge of individual students. Seidel's (1998) process of noticing, collecting and thinking about things begins with the process of labeling phenomena, in this case written responses, and then discovering relevant conceptual categories or themes.

The authors first read student responses to the questionnaire individually and then came together to discuss their observations. This first reading produced a framework of

broad categories or themes. These themes were discussed and given preliminary labels. During a second reading the authors read and labeled the statements individually. When they discussed and compared their individual observations, they discovered that they had agreed on 242 of 270 coded responses, categorizing them in the same theme. This represented 89 percent inter-rater agreement. The remaining items were items where one rater saw a statement as fitting a category but the other did not. This process was iterative, repeating itself several times. Each cycle produced further refinement of the categories until it seemed to the authors that the data had been exhausted and no further refinement was possible. Five themes emerged as representative of the student responses.

One of the most consistent themes to emerge in the student questionnaires for both graduate and undergraduate students was *personal engagement*. Students consistently used terms signifying *engagement* with the topic, and as the faculty continued the analysis, student responses on this theme were further delineated into engagement that was *personal, practical*, and *purposeful* beyond the classroom. Engagement was communicated most clearly through use of personal pronouns, students commenting upon, “my feelings,” “my choosing,” “my interest.”

A second theme to emerge from the student questionnaires was that of *commitment*. Students consistently indicated that the paper was successful because of their commitment in terms of time, effort, and/or research. They included such responses as “fifteen pages in length and was from thirteen sources,” “I did a lot of research and I spent a lot of time,” and “it. . . portrayed the effort I put into writing it.” Statements alluding to commitment were found in response by graduates and undergraduates to all five questions.

The theme of *collaboration* was another clear criterion the students perceived as leading to successful writing. Their comments suggested that working with others—both peers and the professor— and in different stages of writing, from pre-writing to editing, was an important factor in the success of their writing. They made statements such as, "I had many people read it—friends, family, teachers—and they all liked it and gave me input, which I applied to the paper." The collaboration theme was closely linked to the theme of a *systematic approach* to the writing assignment. The respondents often laid out the steps in their system, connecting these steps to the success of the product. For example, one respondent wrote, "I broke the paper down into manageable sections so I would not feel overwhelmed and slated time each week to work on a section." Graduate students seemed to cite collaboration far more then undergraduates. This may reflect the emphasis on cooperative learning in the School of Education's graduate programs or the fact that many graduate students take courses with a cohort of students with whom they work.

External confirmation in several forms was mentioned as an important factor in students considering their writing *good*. Students often mentioned the grade they had received on the paper: "I ended up with an A on the paper," "I got an A!" In addition, respondents saw positive faculty comments confirming the worth of their writing. As an example, one student included, "The teacher wrote, 'Did you know that you are a good writer?'" as a way of knowing that the writing was *good*. The influence of external confirmation on students' evaluation of the quality of their work could not be ignored. Graduate and undergraduate students also seem to differ in how often they cited external

confirmation, with graduate students much more likely to state that grades, professors' comments, and peer feedback were important to them.

Once the general themes were established, the authors looked closely at each question to determine how the themes emerged over the range of questions.

Question One – "Think of the best paper you've written. Describe it briefly below."

Seventy-one students provided written responses to the first question on the survey. The first "noticing" by the authors was that students selected quite diverse papers as their *best*. They described recently written projects and papers written as far back as third grade! Interestingly, only 12 of the 71 students chose papers that had literary themes or involved the critique or analysis of a poem or story. The vast majority of the remaining papers were discipline specific and involved writing in the disciplines.

By far the two most common themes in the responses to this question were *engagement* and *commitment*. Of the 38 responses regarded as code-able by the authors, 19 mentioned the theme of *engagement* and ten cited *commitment*. The theme of *engagement* is defined as assignments that are seen as purposeful, practical or personally engaging. *Commitment* is a related concept but specifically addresses the time demands and perceived effort involved in completing the assignment.

One graduate student's response captures the theme of *commitment*. In describing a paper written about Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder for an upper division writing class, she said, "I consider it my best paper, because it was the one I spent the most time writing and researching. It is also a favorite of mine because it led me to enroll in a class working with ADHD children." For this student, the paper was the *best* because it demanded what she perceived as an extraordinary amount of time to research and write.

This theme is also seen in another graduate student's comment. He described a paper written for an upper division psychological course as "…quite possibly the most difficult paper I have ever had to write." An undergraduate student expresses the same theme in a straightforward way: "It was the best because it was the most difficult assignment I have ever had to complete. It was the best even though I got a B."

The theme of *personal engagement* was often expressed in terms of the paper's connection to the student's personal life and was stated in terms of self-reflection and a turning inwards. Other times *engagement* had a practical flavor and was expressed as a connection to students' current or future professions. One student described her "best paper" with a clear connection to herself in the world: "It incorporated reflections, growths, and introspective realizations about myself and the world in relation to me." An undergraduate described the personal elements of a paper she wrote about a favorite band: "It reflected back on the band's life and then on mine." Another undergraduate described her best paper as "…a first person research paper on how I, and others, know about ourselves through gender." A more practical sense of engagement is reflected in statements such as, "It was a paper that had to integrate humor and your chosen profession." A graduate student described the best paper she had ever written as a grant proposal that gained her materials for her classroom.

Question Two—"What was good about it? How did you know it was good?"

Sixty-four students provided written responses to the second question. The most common theme was *external confirmation*, cited in thirty-nine percent of the code-able responses. The themes of *commitment* and *engagement* were also common, with thirty-one percent of the responses coded as *commitment* and twenty-eight percent *engagement*.

The responses citing *external confirmation* as a factor in knowing if a paper was good were not unexpected. Grading itself teaches students that external confirmation is important. Twenty-three percent of the respondents indicated the grade they had received on their "best" paper: "I received an A+ on the paper," "I also got an A on it," "the professor reinforced my paper by giving it a good grade," "I had received an A on the paper." Some respondents compared their grade to those of others: "I received the highest grade," "I had received an A on the paper, one of the higher grades in the class." One respondent used the grade alone to determine quality: "I had no idea that my paper was as great as the grade reflected." One graduate student captured the tone of such responses with the comment, "When I did get the paper back, not only did I get a good grade, but I got the highest grade in the class. In four years of college, I had never received the highest grade on anything."

Other students wrote about *external confirmation* without commenting on a grade. For example, an undergraduate wrote, "I knew the paper was good when my professor asked me to read it out loud to the class." And another wrote, "She (my instructor) told me she was impressed with my writing." Faculty confirmation is clearly an indicator of *good*: "I know it was good because my professor wrote very nice and good comments on my paper."

A very few respondents—three of 64 comments—mentioned *internal* rather than *external* confirmation in knowing their writing was good: "I knew it was good because I was excited about writing it and when I finished and read it over, I was still excited" and "I knew it was a good paper only because I could feel it as I would read it back to myself." Another respondent was conscious of this tension between internal and external

confirmation as indication of worth: “I knew it was good because when I read it I felt like, ‘Yeah, That sentence rocks!’ or ‘Wow, What an original idea?’ (Professors’ notes sometimes support these feelings, but oftentimes they do not agree).”

Almost equal to *external confirmation* were comments about *commitment*. As noted above, *commitment* was coded with indicators of time, effort, and research. All of these figured into students’ judging their paper as good. For example, one student wrote, “I think the reason the paper was so good was that I did a lot of research on the topic.” Time and effort were also cited as indicators of worth: “took a lot of time on it,” “I knew it was good because I put a lot of time and effort into it.”

The theme of *engagement* as a factor in knowing a paper was good was not expected. However, twenty-eight percent of the responses indicated that engagement was, indeed, an important factor in their determination of *good*: “I knew that it was good because I had drawn from my experiences”; “It was good because it voiced my true thought”; “I thought it was good because I was passionate about what I was writing about.”

The themes of *collaboration*, a *systematic approach*, and *knowledge* combined comprised twenty percent of the responses, with *knowledge* the most commonly cited theme in this group.

Question Three – “Describe the process or steps you went through to write such a good paper.”

This question directs student attention to the “how to” of writing a *good* paper. Although the question is focused on the process of writing a good paper rather than on a description of the product, student responses suggested similar themes. Sixty-eight

students responded to question three. Seventeen students cited the theme of *collaboration*. Collaboration involved working with others to complete the assignments, either by working in a work or seeking and receiving feedback from others. One student described her successful experience working in a group:

> Throughout the quarter we consulted with each other and assisted each other in every way possible. As I mentioned before, it was not a competition to earn a better grade than others in our group. We often brought in articles or data for each other to use.

Often, the collaboration seemed less formal. For instance, students often worked with friends who were not involved in the class: "After many revisions, I let a friend read my paper for additional input" or "This included having an English major buddy proofreading my paper, as well as the TA reading some of my drafts." Another student called upon what seemed like an extensive network of editor friends: "I did a rough draft and had friends read it and critique it. I did revisions and had a few other friends read it."

Question Four – What was different about this paper from other less successful papers you have written?

The theme of *engagement* emerged even more strongly in students' responses to Question Four. Forty-six of 50 responses were judged as code-able by the authors, and, of these, 29 or sixty-three percent used the theme of engagement to describe how their *best* paper differed from less successful writing attempts. One graduate student provided a succinct definition of this theme: "The internalization of the topic. When you live something and make it your own it's yours. Then, you can write passionately and insightfully." An undergraduate student also expressed it simply and elegantly: "I

believe that when working with topics and issues that are close to one's heart and that one is passionate about, it makes the process a lot easier." *Engagement* gave a sense of ownership that seemed to go beyond the usual confines of course structure: "The major difference in this paper was the clarity of my own true voice. It was truly my paper."

Personal engagement was multi-dimensional. Sometimes it had a deeply personal meaning as students wrote about aspects of their own lives:

> I think the main difference between the success of this paper and other papers I have written was my interest level. I genuinely wanted to know, for personal reasons, more about my family and why they do the things they do. This paper forced me to open up discussions with my family members about issues we have not discussed before. I *wanted* to write this paper because it meant something to me.

Often the engagement seemed an expression of choice and the opportunity to be creative:

> My ability to be independent as far as subject matter, theme, and format. Since I was so curious and interested as well, I felt compelled to write a great paper! Other, less successful papers tend to be the ones that don't allow for creativity and independence.

A third facet of personal engagement came from seeing the paper as connected to future professional goals. One undergraduate student put it simply as, "In college, I wrote some successful papers, but this one was relevant to my actual job." Another graduate student wrote,

> Well, truthfully there was more at stake for me since I was one step closer to a career move. I definitely took my graduate work much more seriously. But on

the other hand, I seemed to approach this paper from the start with much more professionalism.

A number of students also expressed the related themes of *hard work* and *commitment*. Sometimes this was expressed as the amount of time spent working on the paper or its length: “This paper was close to 50 pages and I put my heart and soul into it. It was an assignment that I worked on for almost an entire school year.” Or, “The difference between the success of this paper and others I have written was the amount of time I spent researching and revising it.”

Question Five – What would it take for you to write a paper as good as or better than the one you have described?

Twenty-nine students responded to the fifth question with *engagement* comprising forty-nine percent of the responses, and *collaboration* and a *systematic approach* both noted thirty-nine percent of the time. Respondents captured the need for engagement through such statements as, “I would need to choose a topic that I find truly interesting, research the material and be able to relate to it to my life in some way or another”; “Have a topic that interests me is one of the primary ways to get me to write a good paper.” Personal engagement was specifically cited in over fifty-percent of the engagement responses, with students mentioning personal connections and interest as key factors.

A desire for collaboration also emerged as a theme: “I believe input from my professor or peers who are also interested in my topic, would help me write an even better paper.” Another responded, “I would want a lot of help from peers and professors to critique my paper. I think feedback is an excellent way for me to improve my writing and learn from my mistakes.”

Students citing a systematic approach (39%) as a factor in writing another quality paper focused on the steps they had followed in a successful writing assignment: “In order to write an even better paper, I would first want to follow the steps that helped me in writing this paper.” Another wrote, “I plan to repeat the step-by-step process that I utilized before.”

Although not as common, twenty-nine percent of the responses alluded to *commitment*. A time commitment was noted most often: “Namely, finding a sufficient amount of time to dedicate to a research paper” is indicative of these responses. Another connected time to the process: “begin the writing process early allowing ample time for revisions.” A commitment to learning more about quality writing was captured by one respondent: “I think that I need to become aware of the styles of writing and tools that can make my writing more exciting to me.”

None of the students mentioned *external confirmation* as a factor. This, however, is not surprising as the question focused on a future assignment rather than one they had completed and had assessed.

Discussion

Hutchings’ (2000) taxonomy of teacher research starts with the question of “what is?” (p. 4). The authors have answered that question using student responses to questions that asked them to reflect on their own experiences with writing. Their responses suggest that *personal engagement* with topics that students perceived as personally meaningful, practical, or purposeful beyond the classroom was a critical factor in producing their best writing. Peripheral themes closely related to engagement were also suggested by student responses. Students consistently cite *knowledge*, and *confidence* as factors in their

successful writing experiences. There may be a cause-effect relationship here; as students gain knowledge and confidence with the topic, they are further engaged with the writing assignment, finding it meaningful.

A related theme was *commitment*. Students consistently indicated that the paper was successful because of their commitment in terms of time and effort. Somewhat surprisingly, given the typical first question—"How long?"—following any writing assignment, students appeared to value papers that were longer and required them to acquire substantial knowledge. This is quite the opposite of current practice in higher education where some studies indicate that faculty have revised their writing standards to include "fewer, easier, and shorter assignments" (Plutsky & Wilson, 2001, p. 39). Light (2001) found that "The simple correlation between the amount of writing required in a course and students' overall commitment to it tells a lot about the importance of writing" (p. 56).

The third and fourth themes—*collaboration* and *systematic approach*—appear to be of a different type than the themes of *engagement* and *commitment*. They might be interpreted as strategies adopted by students who were engaged and committed to their topics. At the same time, however, they could be interpreted as strategies adopted to increase engagement and commitment, pointing to that same cause-effect relationship noted with knowledge and confidence.

External confirmation closes the loop. Students value the confirmation of others that their writing is good. Positive feedback that affirms engagement and hard work is a powerful influence on students' perceptions of their writing.

The most important question for faculty members who value writing and wish to improve the writing of their students is, "How can this information be utilized to enhance the design and implementation of writing assignments?" This question moves the discussion into the realm of "what could be?" and the development of new models and theories.

Discovering what student writers believe to constitute good writing and what strategies most effectively help them produce high quality writing provides an opportunity to design writing assignments that empower students to join the conversation in their discourse community. This opportunity to consider "what could be" is positively impacted by student perception of "what is," relating to Boas' concept of an emic perspective, an analysis of writing from the writers' experiences, allowing instructors to design assignments that tap into the writers' needs as they perceive them.

Implications for the Instructor

Therefore, "what could be" according to this study? Certainly, writing assignment design could include the themes as documented in the analysis of student perception of the previous successful writing experiences: *engagement*, *commitment*, *collaboration*, a *systematic approach*, and opportunities for *external confirmation*. To incorporate these themes into writing assignment design, let's consider one at a time.

Personal Engagement

Students find success when the writing is personally meaningful, practical, or purposeful beyond the classroom. Instructors can include these considerations as they plan the writing opportunities for the course. As the instructor shifts from thinking of writing as a means to record what has been learned to writing as a means of student

learning, the writing assignment can incorporate student experience or needs in relationship to the topic at hand. The first step in incorporating student experiences is to offer as much choice as possible in selecting topics. Choice in assignments is not only potentially a good way to increase student engagement but changes the balance of power in the classroom, providing an antidote to student passivity and disempowerment (Weimer, 2002, p. 8). Another general strategy is for instructors to help students discover how the material is meaningful, practical, or purposeful beyond the classroom, assisting them to make the experiential connections that will enhance their engagement with the assignment. Finally, whenever possible, instructors can structure assignments so that they draw upon students' life experiences. Providing concrete mechanisms for such relationships could well improve student writing, for as the students reported, when they are engaged in these ways they are more successful as writers.

Commitment

Students also strongly associate successful writing assignments with their commitment of time and effort to the assignment. As we note above, this leads to the somewhat surprising hypothesis that students value (and perhaps find more meaningful) longer more demanding assignments that require them to commit time and effort to mastering their topics. Student responses suggest that there is a kind of pride expressed in statements such as, "I did a lot of research and I spent a lot of time," or "It was the best because it was the most difficult assignment I have ever had to complete." It should come as no surprise that in writing, as with most endeavors, persons take pride in accomplishing the difficult. This hypothesis perhaps emboldens instructors to raise the bar on their assignments and suggests that they experiment with longer, more complex

assignments. This is not to imply that simply increasing the length of a writing assignment will increase students' sense of commitment. The student responses in this study connect length of assignment with the amount of research and effort involved, with a sense of purpose in accomplishing a challenging task. Therefore, assignment design should include a clear purpose, one that shows the relationship between a longer, more complex assignment and learning. The key is for the student to commit time and energy towards substantive work with a single focus or topic.. For example, at our university the writing program includes an opportunity for students to link three major assignments in the freshman composition class. Students begin the linked assignments with an exploratory essay on a possible research topic. They write a paper exploring their research process as they work toward creating an annotated bibliography. Having completed some preliminary research on the topic and explored an area of inquiry in their exploratory essay, students build upon their research and understanding of the topic to argue for a position in their documented persuasive essay. These linked assignments tap into the students' sense of commitment and pride in meeting rigorous academic expectations.

The researchers behind the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2004) have identified the level of academic challenge as a key benchmarks of student engagement and learning. The NSSE defines challenge as "time spent preparing for class, amount of reading and writing and institutional expectations for academic performance." Although this research does not deal directly with institutional expectations, it is clear from student responses that time spent in preparation for writing and time spent on

writing itself are clearly important factors in deciding a project represented a “best paper.”

Systematic Approach

Student voices clearly attributed part of their writing success to a systematic approach. This could be the result of writing as a process work prior to the actual assignment, but many students referred to the classroom procedures as important factors in their successful writing. For example, one respondent wrote, “The paper was written in many steps, we talked about in class.” Another said, “My writing class was designed to help us write a large paper. The main idea was to do the paper step-by-step.” Other students cited the idea of turning several smaller papers into a longer piece as suggested in the *commitment* discussion. One respondent wrote, “In the end, I had four strong papers to combine into one.” Another said, “My final paper was a synthesis of the two papers.” This has implications for instructors as they design the writing assignments in their curriculum. Establishing some steps to the process as part of the assignment design may be an important factor in student success in terms of both *commitment* and *systematic approach.*.

While a systematic approach is universally recommended, and student responses seem to reconfirm the value of such an approach, in a recent review of syllabi in a school of education very few included any mention of process in terms of building a systematic approach to their course assignments and descriptions. This emphasizes the need for programs to look closely at their syllabi, considering how writing is presented in coursework. With students themselves addressing the efficacy of a systematic approach

to writing assignments, faculty would be well served to include more explicit writing outcomes and guidelines in course materials.

Collaboration

Collaboration has been identified as one of the key indicators of student learning and engagement (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and is included as a key component of the National Survey on Student Engagement. Students in this study consistently cited collaboration as a factor in their successful writing experiences. Students discussed collaborating in several stages of the writing process, from initial idea to final revision and editing. This, too, provides valuable insight for assignment design. Assignments could include several opportunities for collaboration with peers, instructor, and others outside the classroom. Instructors can incorporate several different types of collaborative experiences into the design of writing assignments. For example, they might provide opportunities for students to discuss their writing ideas in small, collaborative "thinking about writing" groups; they might include independent writing sessions with peer feedback review and editing opportunities, including in-class writing workshops to allow students time to read and write together. Assignment design could include peer writing partners or groups, peer editing partners or groups, as well as opportunities for students to submit drafts to the professor for feedback (as opposed to summative grading). These are but a few ways that writing assignment design can help students recognize and benefit from the collaborative nature of writing at the university.

The voice of one student captured the value of working with peers in an ongoing manner: "Throughout the quarter we consulted with each other and assisted each other in every way possible." This, when taken in context of describing a *successful* writing

experience, provides guidance for assignment design. Instructors can institute “check points” where students share and discuss their work. Students realized the value of collaboration as opposed to competition. “It was not a competition to earn a better grade than others in our group,” one student wrote, “We often brought in articles or data for each other to use.” This type of collaboration can become an integral part of the writing process. It can create a learning community in the classroom. In addition to peer collaboration, students cited opportunities to collaborate with professors as a means to writing success. One respondent captured this theme particularly well, “I had my professor go over any sections of the paper that were questionable. By doing this, I got feedback not only on my questions, but I got a better idea of what she was looking for in the paper.” This student voice challenges instructors to provide feedback opportunities during the writing process rather than after the fact.

With this collaborative mindset, students may feel more comfortable sharing their work outside the classroom. For example, several students noted friends and others as important collaborators in their writing success, one even noting her daughter as a collaborator. The more instructors help students view writing as a process of working alone *and* with others to “get words and ideas down on paper and then reflect on them, perhaps share them, rethink, them, revise them, try them out on audiences, assess the communication, and so forth” (Reynolds & Bruch, 2002, pp. 12-13) and the more this concept is made part of writing assignment design, the more success students may experience as they learn to write across the disciplines.

External Confirmation

Many students—as to be expected—commented upon the final grade as indicative of their success: “I ended up with an A on the paper”; “I got an A!”; “I also got an A on it, which helped reinforce my pride in it.” It should come as no surprise that students value this summative feedback, especially when it confirms their own perceptions of their writing. For students who receive positive comments on papers they think is their *best* work, final comments and grades perhaps serve to lift their esteem as writers and provide some encouragement when the next paper comes around. At the same time, given the apparent value placed on instructor feedback and the cost in instructor time and energy, this summative feedback seems to provide little value to the process of learning to be a writer. But if instructors take students’ valuing of instructor feedback and use it to create feedback opportunities that are formative in addition to summative, the efficacy of this feedback loop can be enhanced. Instructor feedback can then encourage writers while engaged in the process of writing rather than simply serve as post hoc confirmation of students’ perceptions about their ability, or lack of ability.

Recommendations for Further Inquiry

The themes and subsequent suggestions discussed above serve to expand the conversation about student writing to include the voices of students themselves. The addition of this perspective will hopefully encourage faculty to design better assignments or ask the better questions suggested by White (1985, p. 100). These themes should be a starting place for further conversation and at least two lines of inquiry. The themes themselves need further investigation. These same questions can be asked of more students in different settings. This will lead to more “noticing, collecting, and thinking about things” (Seidel, 1998, p. 2) and continue the process of theory building described

by Strauss and Corbin (1990). A second line of inquiry can assess the efficacy of these ideas in individual classrooms. At this level, the assumption is that if these themes are important to student writers, and if greater attention is paid to them and they are included in the design of writing assignments, the quality of student writing should improve.

References

Bean, John C. (2001). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Black, Rhonda S., Sileo, Thomas W. and Mary Anne Prater. (2000). Learning journals, self reflection, and university students' changing perceptions. *Action in Teacher Education, 21*(4), 71 - 89.

Boas, Franz. (1943). Recent anthropology. *Science,* 98, 311-314, 334-337.

Chickering, ArthurW. & Gamson, Zelda F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin, 39*(7), 3 – 7.

Cooperrider, David L. & Srivastva, Suresh. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In William A. Pasmore & Richard W. Woodman (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development, Vol. 1.* (pp. 129 – 169). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

De Jong, Peter & Berg, Kim Insoo. (2000). *Interviewing for solutions* (2nd ed.). Florence, KY: International Thompson Press.

Frake, Charles. (1962). The ethnographic study of cognitive systems. In Ward Goodenough (Ed.), *Anthropology and human behavior* (pp. 111-129). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Goodenough, Ward. (1956). Componential analysis and the study of meaning. *Language,* 32, 195-216.

Goodenough, Ward. (1963). Some applications of Guttman scaling analysis to

ethnography and culture theory. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 19, 235-250.

Goolishian, H.A., & Anderson, H. (1991). An essay on changing theory and changing ethics: Some historical and post structural views. American Family Therapy Association Newsletter, 46, 6-10.

Harris, Marvin. (1976). History and significance of the emic/etic distinction. *Annual review of anthropology*, 5, 329-350.

Huot, Brian A. (2002). *(Re)articulating: Writing assessment for teaching and learning*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Hutchings, Pat. (2000). *Opening lines: Approaches to the scholarship of teaching and learning.* Menlo Park, CA: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Light, Richard J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

National Survey of Student Engagement (2004). *2004 annual survey results.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

Pelto, Pertti J. & Pelto, Gretel H. (1978). *Anthropological research: The structure of inquiry.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Plutsky, Susan & Wilson, Barbara A. (2001). Writing across the curriculum in a college of business and economics. *Business Communication Quarterly, 64*(4), 26 – 40.

Reynolds, Thomas J. & Bruch, Patrick L. (2002). Curriculum and affect: A participatory developmental writing approach. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 26, 12 – 20.

Rose, Mike. (1985). The language of exclusion: Writing instruction at the university. *College English*, 47, 341-359.

Saleebey, Dennis. (1997). *The strengths perspective in social work practice (*2nd ed). New York: Longman.

Seidel, John V. (1998). Qualitative Data Analysis. *The Ethnographic*, V(v). Retrieved July 2006 from http://www.qualisresearch.com/QDA.htm

Strauss, Anselm and Corbin, Juliet. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Walvoord, Barbara. E. (1996). The future of WAC. *College English 58*(1), 58 – 79.

Walvoord, Barbara E. (2003). New modes of productivity for student learning. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 121, 35 – 49.

Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Weimer, M. (1996). Foreward. In J. C. Bean. *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom* (pp. xvii-xx). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

White, Edward. M. (1985). *Teaching and assessing writing: Recent advances in understanding, evaluating, and improving student performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.