

KALEIDOSCOPE OF VALUES: COMPOSITION INSTRUCTORS, NONCOMPOSITION FACULTY, AND STUDENTS RESPOND TO ACADEMIC WRITING

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What we mean when we call good academic writing good depends on *who* is responding to the writing and *how* they are responding to it. We know that the processes of a reader reading are every bit as complex as the processes of a writer writing. The values applied by educators in their responses to student writing can vary dramatically with the conventions of their discipline, the ways they use writing in the classroom, their personal biases, and the general expectations they have about the quality of the writing of students at a particular school. Such variation is most apparent in meetings in which educators across disciplines attempt to discuss student writing. Often we are left feeling as if we are an entire group of blind people trying to communicate with one another about the elephant we cannot really see. But we know too that the very

differences in the values we bring to writing response are rich lenses with which to capture some of the complexity of academic writing. It follows that in order to build strong Writing Across the Curriculum programs we must first really understand this diversity before setting out agendas for the teaching of writing.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Given the increasing respect we have for these differences in the perspectives of educators, what can we learn about student writing itself and attitudes towards academic writing at a particular school if we give the same student paper to a varied group of faculty and students? I asked this question last year in a project that was part of a larger study examining the writing abilities of students at the University of Minnesota.¹ In the larger study, we developed profiles of strong, typical, and weak writers in all of the writing courses offered by our Composition Program. First, we asked all our composition instructors to provide us with three student papers from their courses that they felt exemplified what they regarded as strong, typical, and weak in relation to what they usually saw in their course. Then using agreed-upon criteria set forth by a recent Minnesota Task Force on Writing Standards, we evaluated writing samples and described how student writing reflected those standards. The basic categories were broken down for analysis into rhetorical context (audience, purpose, and persona), rhetorical content (ability to abstract or synthesize material, analyze critically, order ideas effectively, and convince within the constraints of audience and purpose), and surface correctness. These criteria were initially selected because they seemed to be a reasonable set of minimal standards that most faculty members would generally agree make up "good" writing.

This larger assessment study was carefully designed in this way in order to serve as a naturalistic alternative to standard assessment practices in which uniform writing samples are drawn and scored holistically or for primary traits. Standard practices result in useful numbers, but our purpose was to provide rich, detailed descriptions of student writing at our school. The "strong," "typical," and "weak" labels were not intended to judge the writing or the writers as if this measure formed a universal scale of ability that could be applied by a team of raters. Instead, the categories provided a rough measure by which experienced instructors themselves

could sort and gauge pieces of writing in relation to the whole gamut of writing they encountered at our school. Unlike the broad categories of “skilled” and “unskilled” writing, which are suitable for studies investigating what the “skilled” group knows that the “unskilled” does not, the “strong,” “typical,” and “weak” categories were more appropriately graduated in order to describe a diverse spectrum of writing.

In addition, we distributed copies of the “typical” samples to teachers of composition courses in order to examine the differences and similarities in ways we respond to student writing within the program and to learn from our many perspectives what these papers revealed about it. While our study told us much about student writing and how we looked at writing within the composition program, we had not asked the broader question of how other groups at the University, namely noncomposition faculty members and the students themselves, also looked at academic writing. As I saw it, the responses of these additional groups would provide the missing perspectives of a kaleidoscope that would enable us to see writing at our school more fully. From these responses we could see from different angles not only the writing itself, but some of the ways we see academic writing.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

My study, like others that have preceded it, aimed to determine what factors influence composition and noncomposition faculty perceptions of good writing (Diederich, French, and Carlton 1961; Schwartz 1984; Kirscht and Golson 1983) and student perceptions about quality in writing (Cannon 1981). However, unlike these studies that focus on either faculty or student responses, my method was to compare responses of all three groups to the same student paper. In order to gather this information I first selected one typical paper drawn from a course in advanced expository writing, a course in general academic writing that draws students from a variety of majors. The subject of the paper was rock censorship, a topic that was all the rage among students a couple of years ago when this sample was drawn. If you received as many of these papers as I did, you too are probably an expert on all the ins and outs of the argument. This was a persuasive paper, taking the stance that rock censorship was wrong since it was a form of control of children by parents and government,

since it attempted to legislate morality and since it was probably unconstitutional.

While the writer cited a few sources, in the main the paper argued for reason. For example, he asserted that the censorship organization and the court in which Mozart played invited comparisons, since the court criticized the musician for playing music that did not fit the conventions of the time, much as censorship organizations want to decide what songs are acceptable now. The paper also had a strong personal voice, since the writer often incorporated personal reflections into his argument. For instance, he wrote dramatically at one point: "Few things give me the urge to throw my clenched fist in the air like 'Two Hangmen' can. My heart jumps every time I hear it." Altogether the piece provided the best "generic" sample of academic writing possible in a University in which the actual writing students do can be as varied as the departments themselves.

I then gave the paper to three groups: Ten composition instructors who taught the expository writing course; twenty noncomposition faculty members whose disciplines ranged from German to Engineering, out of whom fourteen responded; and finally, twenty-one students from a variety of majors, who were taking a section of the expository writing course that I was teaching. All the groups were asked to apply the same criteria for judging student writing (that is, the Task Force standards) and to make written comments that would help the writer of the paper understand the grade they assigned it. They were asked to indicate whether the writing struck them as good, average, or poor. In addition, the students were asked to gauge whether the writing seemed stronger, weaker, or about the same compared with their own and to explain how they perceived the standards for writing and the evaluations of writing to vary between their departments and the composition program.

While all the groups were asked to use the three evaluative categories, we were especially interested in learning how they responded to these categories. Since an interdisciplinary task force developed these standards initially, were these factors actually used in evaluation? Was one of the three emphasized more than others? And finally, were there other values influencing their responses to academic writing? Since the paper was distributed completely out of context with a set of "objective" standards to apply, the readers might also reveal directly and indirectly the contexts they

create when they read. What I was trying to do was to put a different twist on the way we usually approach the idea of attitudes towards writing in discourse communities. Volumes have been written on these differences, though at this point most available work is theoretical. We really have very few actual ethnographic studies in which researchers have immersed themselves in the writing and attitudes towards writing in particular departments. What I wanted to do instead was hand representatives of these varied groups a “generic” paper with “generic standards.” And, of course, realizing how problematic it is to have a “generic” anything where writing is concerned, to expect differences in how these standards would be perceived and to expect contexts to be created in this “context-less” exercise.

PATTERNS OF RESPONSE

Though my sample was small, I was also able to gather a description rich in overlapping layers of values. What significant patterns of similarities and differences emerged? Observations within the categories were often remarkably similar for all the groups, even though there were contrasts in those categories that each group saw as most important. In the category of *rhetorical context*, (containing audience, persona, and purpose), some interesting patterns appeared. Composition teachers were much more concerned with how well the paper reached its intended audience than their noncomposition counterparts who rarely mentioned it. As the composition instructors observed, the actual audience of peer readers and their teacher was unlikely to be either strongly against censorship or to find rock music particularly outrageous, which is a stance the writer seems to assume. As one instructor noted, “Isn’t he aware of the fact that rock is our music too?” Composition students worked to try to determine who the audience was, though they didn’t speculate on how well the paper reached it. Some felt the paper was written for readers who would agree with the writer’s position or perhaps for the writer himself since the assumption of his argument was so extreme. Others thought it might be aimed towards peers or a group of nonacademic music lovers because the tone was so casual.

All three groups noticed the lively persona, the personal commitment the writer seemed to have to the topic. Composition teachers were split in their view of how appropriate such a persona,

with its reliance on personal experience as a form of evidence, was for academic writing; most thought it did violate a norm, though a few readers felt it was a norm well worth violating. As one instructor remarked, "Most professors at the University would object to this." Another said pointedly: "Academic writing—authority, proof. This is not enough for an academic audience. . . . If we're aiming for success in a college career, I'd say it was off." The few noncomposition faculty who commented on the personal voice were far less concerned with its appropriateness. One reader remarked favorably: "I liked the paper because it was lively and engaging. The author has a voice—committed, passionate, and lively." Another reader agreed, saying, "The level of informality and the presence of the author are things I urge." Some who commented on it were more concerned with the way it detracted from the argument by distracting the reader. As one professor explained: "I have gathered that you feel strongly about this issue, but you do not persuade me." In contrast, students objected to the persona more than anyone else, sharing misgivings about personal voice in academic writing. One student typified this reaction in saying: "The paper is written on too much of a personal level—many of its arguments are personal and emotional, and therefore may not carry much weight with the average person."

In the category of *rhetorical content*, (containing ability to abstract material, analyze critically, order ideas effectively, and convince within the constraints of audience and purpose), the different groups found different content issues most significant. Composition teachers focused primarily on the array of arguments the writer used, critiquing not only individual arguments, but standing back and critiquing the strategies themselves, such as whether the writer should have relied more on example or brought in more issues. Some of the statements in the paper seemed weak or speculative: As one instructor commented: "Specific arguments [such as] 'People who like to have control over others often feel little control in their own lives' is not as convincing an argument, doesn't prove that it's probable." Other instructors pointed to oversimplified arguments in the paper, such as "Simply telling children what they can and cannot have will likely be ineffective." Many readers also felt that the writer bypassed an opportunity to make a strong point by quoting some of the offensive lyrics: "I wanted to see some rude lyrics," one instructor said. "If you're talking to an academic audience, they want to hear those things."

Noncomposition faculty, in contrast, were most concerned with the way the paper was, in their view, so disorganized, noting that while the piece of writing contained some good ideas, its overall effect was one of unsustained argument. As one reader candidly put it: "What drove me mad about the paper was its organization. I wanted the different arguments labelled, set off from one another, underlined and flagged. I wanted the author to move me through his/her ideas and build to a conclusion. I even liked the conclusion, even if it was unconventional. But sometimes I couldn't bear how we got there." Another agreed, saying in his comments to the writer: "The paper needs stronger organization, needs to build your case point by point in logical steps. You led up to the statement at the top of page two quite effectively—the three objectives there are really your thesis. But after that you frequently wander, sometimes backtrack, mix subjective impression with collected evidence or 'legal' arguments."

Noncomposition instructors also critiqued individual arguments, testing them for logic and consistency. One professor, for example, noted that it was questionable whether the rating of music was a constitutional issue or whether it could even be called censorship. He also commented on the writer's ad hominem attack on the motives of the censorship groups, saying that this tack was ". . . never very satisfying in that it fails to address the issue as seen by its proponents." The comments of noncomposition faculty on individual arguments were almost indistinguishable from those of the composition teachers, though noncomposition professors focused more on the arguments themselves as a given, whereas composition teachers tended to also stand back and critique the arguing/writing strategies underlying them.

Students focused primarily on the writer's inappropriate use of secondary sources. They thought the writer should have used evidence from these sources as his primary persuasive tactic, and that in its absence, he presented a biased argument unacceptable in academia. As a student said: "One weakness of his paper is his lack of sources. He bases all of his arguments on personal opinion and little if any on his research. . . . Many of his statements are biased and unsupported." Others echoed similar views: "It was slightly biased to say the least though. Not as many facts as I would have liked or as I'm used to in my major." Some also found problems with documentation, for example, quotes and paraphrased information that needed notation.

Along with the groups of instructors, the students critiqued individual arguments too, with some readers pointing out logical errors and inconsistencies with the rigor of both noncomposition and composition teachers. One reader commented: "I felt that the reference to the movie *Amadeus* was a weak support for his/her argument"; another student agreed: "The 'Mozart' analogy does not apply to his issue at all, and it should not have been included. Rock music does not need such attempts to 'legitimize' it. Also it doesn't help that the writer is familiar with Mozart solely on the basis of a fictionalized account of his life, or that he treats the movie *Amadeus* as a valid historical source."

In the area of *surface correctness* all three groups thought the paper contained several surface problems, not excessive, but too many for it to be considered an excellent final draft. Noncomposition faculty noticed that typos, spelling errors, and problems with sentence and paragraph construction contributed to a sense that the paper was still in rough draft form. Composition instructors concluded that the mechanical errors seemed parallel to the vagueness of the argument of the paper. As they saw it, both problems led to misunderstandings by readers. Composition students found problems with sentence and paragraph construction, transitions between paragraphs, and grammar and spelling mistakes. Among the composition students, the writers that I considered the strongest in the class perceived the piece as having only a few mechanical problems, whereas the weaker writers found it riddled with surface errors.

Overall, all three groups centered most of their comments in the content area. However, composition teachers focused more on audience. They also found that categories overlapped often, that any given problem could reflect several criteria: What appeared to be a problem in abstracting material, for example, could also be a problem reaching the audience or projecting persona. For composition instructors writing issues often constellated in this way, whereas with the groups of noncomposition faculty and students a given problem in the paper was most often isolated and seen as representative of one criterion only.

In terms of other values, other contexts these readers brought to this task, both composition and noncomposition teachers considered where the piece of writing was in its process, whether it was a rough or final draft, and graded accordingly. Many teachers in both groups assigned provisional grades and made suggestions

for revision. As one noncomposition faculty member said in his mock comments to the writer: "You have a good start. You need to go back through the paper several times." A composition instructor remarked: "I'd say 'I don't want to grade this the way it is right now—come talk to me about it.' Maybe the student hasn't understood the assignment." Students, however, treated the paper as a final draft. They tended to confine their comments to after-the-fact justification of grades rather than offering advice for improving the paper.

Both groups of teachers tried to contextualize the paper in order to evaluate it, even though they had not been asked to do so. Noncomposition teachers had a tougher problem here, since for many of them the subject matter of this paper was remote from anything they might actually receive. But they often tried to put it in the context of a course ("I'm imagining it for a contemporary moral problems course for a unit on censorship") or to connect it with the way they generally handle writing in a course. Composition teachers also contextualized the piece of writing according to how it compared with other papers in the same or similar courses or how it fit into imaginary real-world contexts. For the composition instructors the question of what the assignment required was of paramount importance. As one composition instructor commented: "When I was looking at this, it kept occurring to me how much I need to know what the assignment was. I have taken to having my own assignment at my side when I grade." In contrast, neither noncomposition faculty nor students brought up this consideration.

Comments of both sets of teachers were remarkably similar; both often framed their responses as rhetorical questions or responded from personal perspectives. Composition instructors, as might be expected, made more comments on the writing itself. Students did not comment at length either in the margins or at the end of the paper, and while they explained their grades, they did not slant their comments towards writing improvement.

Finally, the teachers were similar in their grading patterns. Both groups showed wide variety in assigned grades varying at the extreme from "A" to "F," with most grades falling into the "B/C" range. Composition teachers handed out more "C's" than the other group of teachers, though two noncomposition faculty assigned it a grade of "F," while the lowest grade it earned from composition instructors was a "D." For both groups grade variation

often depended on where the writer was perceived to be in the writing process. How close was the draft to a final version? Students, however, assigned the paper a grade of “C,” with only one exception; most felt the paper was average, and weaker than their own writing. Instructor grades on this paper matched the students’ overall perception that the grades they receive on writing within and without composition were similar, with composition instructors being somewhat tougher.

CONCLUSIONS

What does the study tell us about academic writing and our attitudes towards writing, (given that this is a very small sample and Minnesota is a very large school)? The surprises are what strike me as most significant: That noncomposition faculty were so aware of differences in the quality of successive drafts, even flexible enough to assign provisional grades and suggest revisions, was unexpected. Perhaps this attitude reflects the missionary work the Composition Program has been doing for a few years now. Faculty focus on logic in the paper was more predictable; many even brushed off their Latin rhetorical terms for the occasion. This emphasis on logic in individual arguments and overall organization no doubt reflects rationalist values in academia, along with the perhaps narrow way we define critical thinking and thus appropriate academic writing exclusively as logic and analysis.

While less focused on logic, the composition instructors seemed equally conservative in finding the strong voice in the paper inappropriate. Here they surprised me with their traditional—and perhaps narrow—sense of academic writing. It is interesting also to see the complexity of the response of writing teachers compared to the other groups: For example, the composition instructors critiqued not just the elements of the argument itself but tried also to surmise the strategies behind the arguments. They mixed criteria, and were less likely to elevate only one. So, for example, even a spelling error, seen as a matter of surface correctness for the other groups, was seen by the composition teachers as a possible audience issue, since in some contexts, spelling errors can convey carelessness to an audience. Previous studies have found English teachers highly influenced by errors even though they profess to attend to issues of content and organization (Mosenthal 1983, 185), perhaps even more so than noncomposition faculty (Weiser 1981, 12). However,

in this study neither group of instructors seemed overly swayed by mechanical problems.

The responses of students were especially surprising at times. I expected them—rather than the noncomposition faculty—to consider not only the writing product but the process, since they had spent ten weeks looking at rough drafts in conferences and discussing writing processes in my class. Instead, they automatically treated the paper as a final product, thus suggesting that perhaps our missionary work with them is not so successful. Their grading standard was perhaps the toughest of all the groups, with the solid “C” they assigned the paper, even though, in my opinion, the writing sample was in many ways stronger than the average paper I saw in the class. Possibly their evaluation resulted from placing so much emphasis on the use of secondary sources. Other studies have also found that students are preoccupied with documentation and presenting material factually (Cannon 1981, 8). Student concern with this issue of sources in academic writing seems to point to special problems for them, since they place a high value on something that none of these instructors at least see as that essential.

Altogether these findings should lead us to question our notion of academic writing and to continue encouraging the development of contextualized writing assignments in Writing Across the Curriculum efforts. Academic writing, as seen through the lens of this study, appears to be very constraining indeed when noncomposition faculty place so much emphasis on logic and organization; when composition students, perhaps reflecting faculty concern, focus so much on facts and documentation; and when composition instructors fear a strong voice and the interjection of personal opinion in writing. As teachers incorporating writing into courses, all faculty might consider aspects of rhetorical context as much as content. The noncomposition faculty in this study might specify audience, persona, and purpose in their assignments, while composition instructors might consider strategies to help students understand persona. Many students feel frustrated by what they perceive as the rigidity of academic writing at both levels of context and content. Some say they feel they have to efface their voices in accordance with academic convention before they have even begun to develop voices at all. For one student, academic voice was like “spitting out information like an encyclopedia.” Standard formats for content can also be frustrating. As another student

told me: "When you're in school, you learn *the* form, *the* way that you write, *the* outline, and *the* thesis statement. It has to go A-B-C-D." In composition, we already know that argumentation and analysis are simply conventions and not the only way to think complexly or grow intellectually. So these findings remind us that we perhaps need to broaden our perceptions of what counts in academic writing.

Such comparative studies are useful because they capture a piece of writing through a kaleidoscope of different views. It manages to hold the picture—with all its differences—long enough for us to glimpse this "elephant" we as educators are trying to talk about. I have used the study as a way to communicate these differences in talking with noncomposition faculty, particularly as a way to express the broader rhetorical goals we as composition instructors often have for writing. And students in a class I taught during Winter 1989 for people with writing anxiety found the results particularly useful, since they were able to see the similarities and differences in the standards they were so anxious about meeting. As students, they learned that their own values and concerns about writing did not always match those of their readers. My study was a small one, but we will certainly continue to learn more as assessment studies keep moving in the direction of uncovering interdisciplinary perspectives on writing.

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NOTE

¹The larger assessment study, *The Development of Writing Abilities During the College Years*, was conducted at the University of Minnesota by Lillian Bridwell-Bowles during the years 1986-1988. It will appear in a forthcoming publication of the National Council of Teachers of English.

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