Defining Essential Writing Skills For College Graduates

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Writing is taught in public schools and colleges as a way to develop individual students for their roles in society and to improve their skills for the workplace. College faculty constantly strive to improve students' skills and abilities especially in the area of communication. Faigley and Miller (1982) found that writing is an important and frequently used skill in many occupations and by many employers of college graduates. However, criticisms of the writing skills are heard increasingly from professionals who hire college graduates (Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffe, & Skinner, 1985). The inability of large numbers of new employees to meet the reading, writing, or computational standards required by many segments of American business is an economic and competitive issue for United States companies challenged by foreign enterprises (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990). As a result, more corporations are trying to influence the United States educational system and thus improve the skills of future new workers (Coates, Jarratt, & Mahaffie, 1990). The nation's leaders realize the importance of improving college graduates' abilities. Objective 5, Goal 5 of the National Educational Goals calls for a substantial improvement in the ability of college graduates to demonstrate an advanced ability to communicate effectively.

What writing skills should college graduates attain in order to be effective citizens and productive employees? Policymakers, employers, and faculty responded to a national survey designed to gather answers to this question based upon their own experiences with college graduates. They were asked to evaluate the importance

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of a wide variety of writing skills identified for college graduates from the relevant literature in the field. This article presents the areas of consensus concerning the critical writing skills for undergraduates.

The Research Context

There are three major generations of research on composing (Faigley et al., 1985). The first generation of writing research studies assumed that writing was a linear process with three main stages: pre-writing, writing, and re-writing. The second generation focused more directly on the writer's strategies for composing and emphasized that planning occurs through the composing process and that the stages of writing are not clear cut and sequential. Composing activities were considered "recursive" or "embedded" (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Sommers, 1980). Research in this second generation examined the composing process rather than only evaluating the final product's characteristics. The major considerations included writing contexts, stimuli, pre-writing, planning, starting, composing texts, revising, and stopping. While this generation of researchers did not view writing as a linear process, they did believe the process to be orderly with writers taking information from their environment and memory, and using it to set goals that would guide how the text is constructed. The third generation of research is concerned with how to teach writing as a process to improve the writer's cognitive resources (Beaugrande, 1984). This generation includes the examination of writing as a "social act that takes place in established contexts such as those of academic disciplines" (Faigley et al., 1985, p.12). Bazerman (1981) highlights the differences in the nature of research among various disciplines and how these differences affect the writing.

Current discussions of composing reflect an array of theoretical positions or frameworks. There are a range of skills associated with these perspectives and they are represented in the national Delphi survey outlined in this article. According to current thinking, the writing process is not a linear activity and it can differ depending upon the specific context. Still, faculty, employers, and policymakers believe there are common abilities needed by college graduates.

Methodology

Sample

A stratified random sample of institutions were selected to participate in this study. These institutions represented the diversity of colleges in the United States and reflected differences in Carnegie types, student enrollment, and geographic location. The sample included both two- and four-year institutions as well. The academic vice-president or the equivalent senior administrator at 72 different colleges and universities agreed to nominate faculty, policymakers, and employers as potential participants for this study. Ultimately, 210 individuals participated in the initial survey, and 174 individuals continued their participation in the follow-up survey.

Instruments and Methods

The Delphi survey technique was used to gather feedback from faculty, employers, and policymakers. This approach has been used for planning in many higher education settings to improve communication and reach some consensus about a variety of issues (Uhl, 1983). In this study, the technique was used to develop and determine the range of possible skills and competencies for writing. This tool was particularly effective since the identification of writing skills involves the collective judgment of diverse groups of stakeholders. The skills are more likely to be accepted if more people participate in their exploration. Through the Delphi process, participants have adequate time for thinking and reflecting about the importance of potential skills.

A literature review was conducted that identified and synthesized the important skills cited by many writing experts and employers. The initial survey was developed by incorporating the major skills identified from previous research studies. A focus group and an advisory board reviewed draft versions and their feedback strengthened the survey. The national sample was asked to evaluate each writing skill ranging from "no importance" to "extreme importance." Respondents based their decisions upon their own experiences with college graduates at the particular institution, company, or agency with which they were currently affiliated.

The new national study reported in this article sought to build upon the findings of previous important scholarly work. However, most of the previous studies completed have surveyed or interviewed faculty

as a group separate from employers. This current study differs in that employers, faculty, and policymakers were all asked to respond to the same surveys. In a follow-up survey, participants were given the group mean or average for each item on the original survey where there were significant differences in the ratings of importance among the three groups. Respondents had the opportunity to reconsider their own responses in light of the group's averages and to articulate their own reasons for disagreeing with the group as a whole. The ultimate goal of this project was to identify the areas of consensus among three different stakeholder groups through two rounds of surveys.

Results and Discussion

Audience Awareness

Most researchers agree that "audience awareness," or the ability to develop a representation of the potential readers of a text, is one of the most important skills for success in writing. Ideally when writers begin writing, they know who their audience will be and what relationship they hope to establish with them. Empirical studies (Atlas, 1979; Beach and Anson, 1988; Berkenkotter, 1981; Flower and Hayes, 1980) have shown that audience awareness develops during the college years.

In the Delphi survey, policymakers, employers, and faculty confirmed the importance of audience awareness skills. The ability to choose words that an audience can understand was rated the most important skill and was closely followed by the ability to understand the relationship between the audience and subject matter, and the relationship between the audience and the speaker. The following skills were rated of medium importance: Graduates should be able to consider how an audience will use a particular document; to address an audiences' different cultural and communication norms; and to understand an audiences' values, attitudes, goals, and needs.

Purpose for Writing

Writers usually generate goals to help them reduce the number of constraints they must work within (Flower & Hayes, 1980). Often writers develop goals from their long-term memory, but most goals are created by the writer in response to a specific situation (Faigley

et al., 1985). Through their research, Flower and Hayes (1980) dis-
covered that students create and revise goals throughout the com-
posing process. These goals are often evaluated and revised in light
of what has been written. Goals tend to develop as the written text
progresses, and these goals interact with the text itself as well as
with the situation for which the writing is being completed.

Audience and purpose are often described as important elements of
the rhetorical situation. Frameworks of the rhetorical situation (e.g.
Bitzer, 1968; Booth, 1963) usually include a persona (the image the
writer wishes to project), an audience (the readers), and a subject (the
information that the writer desires to impart) (Faigley et al., 1985).

In the national Delphi study, there were some areas of consensus
among policymakers, employers, and faculty relative to the purpose
for writing. The extremely important skills were the ability to use
vocabulary appropriate to the subject and purpose(s); to state the
purpose(s) to their audience(s); and to arrange words within sen-
tences to fit the intended purpose(s) and audience(s). The remaining
two skills, rated of medium importance, draw on individual creativity
and imagination, such as an appropriate use of humor and eloquence
when approaching a writing task.

Pre-Writing Activities

The pre-writing phase of composition usually involves planning ac-
tivities that help writers prepare for their writing task. A planned
writing task is an activity that has been thought out and designed
prior to its expression. It requires preparation that often includes an
analysis or creation process in order to generate ideas for writing.
There was considerable disagreement among the Delphi survey par-
ticipants about what was important in this section. However, there
were three areas that all respondents agreed were important. College
graduates should be able to research their subject and identify prob-
lems to be solved that their topic suggests. The third skill of medium
importance was the ability to discuss a piece of writing with someone
to clarify what students wish to say.

Organizing

An important skill cited in many studies (Anderson, 1985; Cullen
et al., 1987; Davis & Stohrer, 1989; Faigley, Meyer, Miller, & Witte,
1981; Goswami, Felker, Redish, & Siegel, 1981; Loacker, Cromwell,

Fey, & Rutherford, 1984; Storms, 1983; Witte, Meyer, & Miller, 1982; White & Polin, 1986) is the ability to clearly organize and structure a document. Haswell (1984) concluded that the essays of upper-division college students provided more evidence of logical organization of ideas and had clearer connections between paragraphs than lower division students. Furthermore, White and Polin's (1986) survey of California State University instructors indicated that the ability "to select, organize, and present details to support a controlling idea" was important, as well as the ability to "use appropriate organization and paragraphing" (p. 108). The establishment of an order for the writing task involves the consideration of the needs of the subject matter and the potential readers, especially for the more experienced writers (Faigley et al., 1985).

The most important skills according to these Delphi survey participants were the ability to include clear statements of the main ideas and to maintain coherence within sentences and among sentences, paragraphs, and sections of a piece of writing. Additional skills rated of slightly lower importance included the abilities to develop patterns of organization, to cluster similar ideas, to organize writing to emphasize the most important ideas and information, to provide a context for the document in the introductions, and to demonstrate patterns of reasoning. Several skills were evaluated of medium importance. These included writing informative headings that match the audiences' questions; using knowledge of potential audience expectations to shape a text; creating and using an organizational plan; and setting up signposts.

Drafting

Most writers complete a first draft of their written work. Flower and Hayes (1981) as well as Faigley et al. (1985) note that for skilled writers the actual process of drafting involves the generation of ideas based on goals involving the relationship between the reader and the writer. Less skilled writers are more likely to generate ideas using simple, remembered facts about the topic. Faculty, employers, and policymakers in the national Delphi study agreed that several skills are extremely important for college graduates to possess when drafting documents. The abilities cited as crucial skills by the Delphi survey participants were: to avoid common grammatical errors of standard written English; to quote accurately; to establish and maintain a focus; to write effective introductions and conclusions; to write

effectively under pressure and meet deadlines; to make general and specific revisions; to move between reading and revising to emphasize key points; and to refine the motion of audiences as they write.

Collaborating

The ability of college graduates to write collaboratively is advocated by a number of writing experts (Anderson, 1985; Barclay, Glassman, Koene, Kennedy, & Pineli, 1991; White, 1991; and Witte, 1992). The specific results from Anderson's surveys indicated that writers should be able to co-author written material, delegate writing to others, critique others' drafts, and seek draft critiques from others. White (1991) states that these skills are particularly important in the business world. For example, sometimes several experts contribute particular sections to a major report based upon their own individual area of expertise. In another case, a superior may copyedit the written work of a subordinate.

In this section of the Delphi survey, faculty, employers, and policymakers disagreed about the importance of most collaborative activities. The only area of agreement was the ability to collaborate with others during reading and writing in a given situation, which was rated of medium importance.

Revising

Researchers have discovered that high school and college writers in general do not know how to revise effectively (Faigley et al., 1985). Several studies have attempted to define effective revising abilities. More than inexperienced writers, more experienced writers tend to make changes that affect the structure and content of a text (Beach, 1976; Sommers, 1978, 1980). College freshmen tended to view their first drafts as conceptually complete and believed there was only a need for mechanical corrections. Other researchers have found a predominance of mechanical and word-level revisions among inexperienced writers (Perl, 1980; Pianko, 1979a, 1979b; Stallard, 1974). More experienced writers described their primary objective as finding the form, shape, structure, or design of their argument, while the novice writers concentrated more on changing words as words, divorced from their role in the text. The more mature writers were also more concerned about their audience, and their imagined reader influenced their process of revision by functioning as a critic. The

beginning writers were more concerned with following abstract rules about texts, such as standard, inflexible organizational structures for essays and paragraphs. The more experienced writers tried to discover or create meaning through revision, while the novice writers attempted to bring their writing into congruence with a predefined meaning. Finally, the more experienced writers often viewed revision as a process with different levels of attention and different agenda for each stage. For example, the more experienced writers often separated the content-related revision of their documents from the grammatical and mechanical copyediting.

There were four areas of agreement among the Delphi survey participants. College graduates should be able to correct grammar problems; revise to improve word choice; reduce awkward phrasing and vague language; and select, add, substitute, or delete information for a specified audience. All of these skills were rated at the extreme importance level.

Written Products and Their Features

A study of writing skills at the college level must include not only how students write, but also what they should be able to write after completing their education. Faigley's 1981 (p. 39) survey of 200 college graduate employees indicates that "the ability to use specific business and technical writing document forms" is one of the most important skills that should be taught in college writing courses. Employers, faculty, and policymakers agreed that a number of different products should be effectively written by college graduates with a minimum amount of training in the workplace context, including the ability to write memorandum, letters, formal reports, summaries of meetings, scripts for speeches/presentations, and complete pre-printed forms that require written responses. College graduates should also be able to write step-by-step instructions, journal articles, and policy statements.

Many studies, especially those that involve surveys and large-scale assessment of written texts themselves, indicate specific, detailed features of texts that illustrate writing ability. Cullen et al. (1987) identified these critical skills: "main point is clearly stated or implied"; "essay is grammatically error-free"; "essay demonstrates effective use of sentence variety"; and, "essay demonstrates precise and sophisticated word choice, appropriate to the level of style" (pp. 36-38). Other

studies (Haswell, 1984; White & Polin, 1986; and Witte et al., 1982) continued to add important dimensions of good written products that were incorporated into our survey.

The three groups of Delphi survey participants reached a consensus about the importance of seven skills. College graduates should be able to use correct grammar, syntax (word order), punctuation, and spelling. This skill was rated extremely important followed by the use of language that the audience understands and the use of concise language. The remaining four skills were rated medium importance and included the ability to use active or passive voice where appropriate, define or explain technical terms, use correct reference forms, and use the specific language conventions of the academic discipline or professional area.

Conclusion

The findings from this national study illuminate the most critical writing skills which faculty, employers, and policy-makers believe college graduates should possess. This information is relevant to faculty committees which are working to reform their general education programs. The array of educational skills identified through this study and the accompanying survey can help facilitate faculty discussions and provide them with educational goals to consider for inclusion in the college curriculum.

An inclusive dialogue that includes three diverse stakeholder groups clearly also means there is a greater diversity of the contexts represented in making judgments about writing skills. This variation in contexts provides some potential reasons for the areas of little consensus in the revising and collaborating sections. Many employers comment that once students enter into their professions, there is often little opportunity for making refinements to written products given the time pressures and intense schedules in many companies. Likewise, some companies, due to the nature of their work, foster less collaborative writing activities among employees.

The purpose of this study was to discover the areas of consensus shared by all three stakeholder groups. These key areas represent specific definitions of the elements for effective writing. However, the outcomes from this project do not suggest that all institutions should have the same curricular goals and expected outcomes for their college graduates. Instead, this work points the way to essential skills

that faculty may wish to consider when they are making revisions to the curriculum or their own classes.

The writing process itself as taught at the collegiate level has the potential to develop undergraduates since it requires them to think, question, and analyze. As college students write their ideas into arguments or positions, they are at the same time clarifying their values and developing their character. As Marshall Gregory (1994, p. 34) notes, "It is not too much to expect that students who work hard at learning to write will improve their powers of reasoning and judgement, refine their recognition of good reasons and shapely argument, and strengthen their respect for well-used language and verbal discourse." The ultimate goal is to improve student performance in writing so that college graduates will become more effective communicators at work and in society.

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