Writing in Sociology: Faculty Discussions on Teaching Writing and Student Engagement

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NEW VISTAS: WAC/WID INTERSECTIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Purpose of Research

- Use interview data with disciplinary faculty to examine the tensions that arise when “non-writing” faculty teach writing
- Offer perspectives from faculty members and students

Research Goals:
- To present sociology faculty perspectives on teaching writing
- To discuss the ways in which sociology faculty describe student engagement with various types of writing, including writing requirements and the quality of student writing
- To offer directions for negotiating the tensions inherent within and between these two discussions (particularly useful for writing directors)
Theoretical Framework

• Expansive literature on writing pedagogy in sociology
  ○ Sociologists use both formal and informal writing extensively to assess student learning outcomes (Bidwell 1995; Grauerholz and Gibson 2005; McKinney et al. 2004)
  ○ However, many sociology departments often fail to make the connection between thinking and writing explicit (Garuerholz and Gibson 2006; Kain 2007)
Research Methods and Sample

- Snowball sampling method to obtain in-depth interviews with 19 sociologists
- Represents 7 universities (3 private, 4 public)
- Universities range in size and scope, from liberal arts institutions enrolling about 5,000 students to state institutions with about 35,000 students
- Interview data coded via quasi-grounded theory analysis (Charmaz 1994)
Writing is recognized as a cognitive process, integral to one’s intellectual development, and so it is not easily detached from the acquisition of knowledge.

- Jessie: “I can’t separate them [writing and content].”
- Noelle: “[Sociological writing] has to touch on certain elements. And those elements, to me, are recognition that there’s a social structure in place, and that social interactions are the building blocks of society.”
The assignment of written work launches a process of inquiry, demanding a kind of “back and forth” between the reading, the development of ideas, and the writing.

- Emphasis on the importance of writing as a tool for contemplation, promoting comprehension, and inspiring the development of original thought.
- Michael: “I think there would be a lot less understanding [without writing], because you develop an understanding through the writing, writing is a form of explanation.”

Writing offers students unique opportunities for learning in that it serves as the means to make a distinctive contribution to the field they are engaged in, and so it moves the learning process beyond the simple recall of facts (Herrington 1981).

- Sarah, on exploratory aspects of writing: “[It will] . . . push [students] to ask the big questions” and in turn form their own conclusions.
Writing as Thinking

- Teaching cognition through writing is a natural part of the faculty role; however, provoking cognition requires skill.
- Faculty assume multiple responsibilities when we teach writing in that we are charged with developing interesting assignments, mentoring students with meaningful feedback, and sometimes just stepping out of the way to observe and guide their creativity in the context of disciplinary thought (Sommers and Saltz 2004).
- In our role as writing instructors, we are often first compelled to favor content over grammar
  - Laura: “. . . We can’t be so focused on technique . . . it’s the idea . . . as what’s most important.”
  - Katie: “Students have to write for us to assess their knowledge and performance.”
In speaking about writing as a skill, faculty tended to ground their comments in one of two areas:

- The importance of attending to the superficial attributes of student writing (e.g., grammar and sentence structure)
  - As Ann observes, there are students who need “. . . the basics of grammar; who really do not know how to construct a sentence.”
  - Jim emphasizes “. . . using active voice, avoiding passive voice”
  - Jack comments on issues such as “. . . [the use of] ‘was’ versus ‘were,’ or whatever. . . . Students who don’t write well at all can confuse singular and plural and things like that.”

- The need to guide students through a set of preplanned steps or process in the preparation of written work
  - Paul cites his students’ tendency to focus for too long on parts of the paper that are less relevant to its overarching purpose: “. . . [O]ne issue that comes up quite often with people who are otherwise good students, is the general structure . . . they focus on the relatively subsidiary issue.”
  - As Jack observes, there is a “rhythm to good writing”
Sociologists as “Writing Instructors”

- Faculty feel compelled to correct the technical aspects of student writing
  - Katie: teaching writing “. . . Means more work and a different lens or hat to add to this teaching bundle.”
- Added workload for faculty:
  - Andy: “. . . [T]he amount of time that it would take me to read through and do justice to 35 essays three or four times in the semester would prevent me from doing a lot of other things.”
- Does correcting student grammar actually help students learn?
Practical Applications

- **Novice/Expert Theory**
  - Students do not perform as well when teaching of writing is not coordinated among faculty – the same is also true for faculty

- **“Shared Expertise”**
  - Faculty in disciplines bring cognition orientation and writing program brings writing orientation. The two must be given equal weight

- **Multiple Meanings of Writing**
  - The importance of understanding what “written work” means for each faculty member is important and using as broad a definition as possible is useful
Practical Applications (continued)

- Writing pedagogy: Sociology faculty balance their energies between skill and cognition
  - This is not an either/or, but sociology faculty feel more competent at the latter
  - Faculty development best designed when it meets faculty at their point of strength (cognitive features of writing)
- Offer strategies that “defuse” feelings of incompetence around grammar/skill orientation
- Emphasize/understand the cognitive (rather than skill or superficial/form) features of writing
- Shift institutional conversations toward learning, away from skills
  - Build on institutional programming
  - Integrate writing with other conversations
Selected Bibliography