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AUTHOR Marx, Michael Steven
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ABSTRACT

To come closer to the full "face to face" expression of writing consistent with the intention of the holistic movement, a study investigated the writing attitudes of first year writing students. Subjects, 70 students in the developmental writing group, 77 in the middle ability group, and 68 in the advanced writing group enrolled in freshman writing classes at Skidmore College, completed a questionnaire consisting of three open-ended questions on writing attitudes. Results indicated that the developmental writers shared many of the writing attitudes of the most advanced writers, while the middle ability group often expressed the kind of attitudes expected from students of lower writing ability. Results also yielded five purposes for writing in college: (1) to express the self; (2) to teach students to write; (3) to evaluate students' knowledge; (4) to develop skills necessary for a future job or graduate school; and (5) to learn or discover ideas and information. (Five notes are included.) (RS)

Writing Abilities, Writing Attitudes, and The Teaching of Writing

Michael Steven Marx
Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866

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Aware of the highly complex network of skills functioning simultaneously in the writing process, most college and university writing programs take great efforts in placing students in appropriate writing courses. However, the ability to write effectively depends upon more than past mastery or achieved competence with concrete skills, the information most assessment and placement testing procedures yield. Like any other art, writing depends upon the creator's attitude and understanding of his/her art, not just achieved competence with concrete skills. Attitudes toward writing--although difficult to measure--also define the profile of student writers and their understanding of the writing process before courses begin.

To gain a profile of our student writers, the profession has relied upon two resources: standardized, multiple choice tests and holistic assessment.[1] Measures such as the verbal SAT, the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE), and diagnostic essay tests do not only typically determine students' placement in college writing courses but also often shape teachers' expectations of the students as writers. Whether used individually or together, such information offers only a silhouette of a student writer. In a recent advertisement, the College Board promised that the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) indicates how students "are likely to perform in college-

level writing courses."[2] The TSWE, however, is a test of the concrete skills of writing: "sentence structure, conventions of grammar and idiom, requirements for clarity and economy." Although the College Board claims the TSWE "measures skills fundamental to good writing," the profession recognizes that the skills of good writing involve complex cognitive activities such as analysis, synthesis, and critical thinking. The TSWE or the Verbal SAT does not even begin to measure these skills which we value in our students as they begin our writing classes.

Opposed to what Edward M. White calls the pseudo-objective, analytical reductionism of standardized tests (18), holistic assessment seems to promise a fuller picture of the student writer. "The holistic attitude," explains White, "says that the human spirit and its most significant form of expression must be seen and understood not in part but as a whole, face to face as it were, almost sacramentally" (33). Holistic assessment allows us to see how a student uses language and thinks through his/her use of language. However, holistic assessment forces us to examine only first draft writing, writing that is valued in neither the high school or college writing classes. Although the philosophy behind holistic assessment claims to "approach writing as a central human endeavor" (White 33), the information it yields and the writing it measures deny us the possibility of seeing the writer's craft, how she/he conceives of a work and carefully shapes a text. The holistic approach seems devoid of the human spirit. However, we can capture a glimpse of that

spirit informing our student writers if we understand their attitudes toward the writing process that higher education requires them to engage in. A student's writing ability does not necessarily correlate directly with his/her attitudes toward writing. By clarifying misunderstandings about writing and transforming attitudes, the writing teacher can attempt to further the development of the student writer. Knowing some of students' attitudes towards writing can provide the details that can transform the silhouette drawings of traditional testing into lively portraits.

Composition specialists have tried to record and measure attitudes by various formalized inventories, such as the Daly-Miller test for Writing Apprehension or, more recently, Eugene Hammond's "Survey of Writing Priorities" (11).[3] Applications of the Likert scale from psychological testing, such surveys lend some insight into our student writers, but because the tests silence the student's right to his/her own language by asking the student to choose from a pre-selected inventory of descriptive phrases to express his/her attitudes, we are at best seeing "through a glass darkly."

To come closer to the full "face to face" expression of writing consistent with intention of the holistic movement, I have conducted a open ended survey of first year writing students at Skidmore College over the past four years (1987, 1989, 1991) to gather student attitudes toward writing. Skidmore places students into three writing courses based upon their holistic

scores on a diagnostic essay. Furthermore, to facilitate pre-registration processes, we consult the student's combined Verbal SAT and TSWE scores as a preliminary placement indicator. Students who score below 850 on their combined test scores and receive holistic scores of 1, 2, or 3 place into Writing Seminar I, the developmental writing course. Students whose combined scores are between 850 and 1000 with holistic score predominantly between 3 and 5 enroll in Writing Seminar II, Skidmore's introductory composition class. Our advanced first year writing students take Writing Seminar III; these students have combined scores over 1100 and holistic scores between 4 and 6.

The survey asks three open ended questions: 1. How do you feel about writing? 2. What do you feel are characteristics of "good" writing? 3. What do you feel are the reasons or purposes for writing in college courses? Two hundred fifteen students completed the questionnaire on the first day of their writing classes: 70 in the developmental writing group, 77 in the middle ability level group, and 68 in the advanced writing group. Their test scores and holistic assessment suggest that each grouping is homogenous, distinct from each other according to writing abilities; however, when turning to students' attitudes toward writing, the survey reveals that such divisions by ability break down. The developmental writers share many of the writing attitudes of our most advanced writers. The middle ability range students, on the other hand, often express the kinds of attitudes one would anticipate in students of lower writing abilities. The

responses to the first and third questions of the survey--the focus of my presentation this morning--suggest that surveying students' attitudes toward writing may be important data to supplement our diagnostic measures and to better prepare instructors for their writing classes.[4]

When responding to the first question, "How do you feel about writing?" 60% of the students expressed positive opinions. Most frequently, the students responded that they "enjoyed" writing. As would be expected, almost 88% of the advanced writers reported that they "enjoyed" writing or actually "loved" it. Their excitement about writing ranged from the personal response--"I love to write. Writing is a release of tension, a way to sort out feelings"--to the more practical--"I enjoy writing. It is an extremely necessary tool for communication."

Although assessment measures suggest that developmental writers are far from advanced writers in ability, 55% of the developmental writers shared the advanced writers' positive feelings toward writing as opposed to only 40% of the mid-ability students. As one developmental writer offered, "I enjoy writing and expressing myself." Others interpret writing more broadly. Another student explained: "Personally, I enjoy writing, especially poetry. It's a great self-indulgence and organizing tool." Although the mid-ability students invoked similarly positive verbs to express their favorable attitudes, they tended to qualify their responses. For example, one student noted, "I enjoy writing more than science and math problems and especially

when I know exactly what I am writing about." They also couched somewhat positive attitudes toward writing in objective remarks that removed themselves from the question, such as "it is an important part of society," "it is very important to be able to illustrate with word," or "writing is the most important thing to learn." The greater occurrence of such objective statements about writing suggests that middle ability writers see writing less connected to themselves; writing is an important activity that goes on in the "real world," but it is not an immediate part of their world.

Possibly because of the larger number of personally disengaged responses to this topic, a smaller number of mid-ability writers--only 33%--directly expressed negative feelings towards writing; in contrast, 51% of developmental writers and 38% of advanced writers included negative remarks in their responses. The intensity of the dislike from the mid-ability writers, however, was powerfully conveyed. "I hate to write," one student bluntly put it. "It contains too many rules." The perception of writing as a laborious, intricate task was reflected in other comments which labeled writing "tedious."

Although the percent expressing negative feelings about writing were not so close between the developmental group (51%) and the advanced writers (38%), these two groups chose similar language to express their negative feelings toward writing, words which indicate apprehension rather than outright dislike. One developmental writer explained, "I get real nervous about writing

because I never know how to start" while another lamented, "If I understand it, writing can be gratifying, but if I don't understand the topic, I'm intimidated and nervous." Although phrased with greater sophistication, an advanced writer echoed these concerns: "Expository writing makes me nervous." Developmental writers also described writing as "frustrating." The advanced writers shared this sensation, commenting "writing can be rewarding as well as frustrating." The advanced writers expressed a sentiment one would expect to hear from beginning college writers when they admitted their own insecurity about writing. As one student concluded, "I'm not confident of my ability to write. I am hesitant, somewhat afraid." The shared expression of fear, frustration, and anxiety about writing suggests that both developmental and advanced writers accept the importance of writing.

What students see as the importance of writing was revealed in their responses to the third question, "What do you feel are the reasons or purposes for writing in college courses?" The survey yielded five purposes for writing in college: to express the self, to teach students to write, to evaluate students' knowledge, to develop skills necessary for a future job or graduate school, and to learn or discover ideas and information. Given the apprehension that developmental and advanced writers expressed about writing, it is not surprising that both groups recognized a self-reflexive purpose for writing in college courses: to teach students simply to write better. The

developmental students ranked this purpose the highest (35%) while the advanced writers rated it second (22%). Although a similarly larger number of mid-ability students rated this idea important (20%), it placed third on their list, and their responses suggest that these students see writing as a task that can be mastered in one single composition course.

Developmental and advanced writers also view writing as a means to an end, be it career or graduate school. For both groups, only 15% of the comments endorsed this reason for writing in college. Although advanced writers offered this reason the least often, the remarks attest to their understanding of the grave implications writing skills can have in shaping their future. As one student concluded: "Almost all of your future progress may be based on what and how you write." Once again, the mid-ability students appeared distinct from their peers. Almost 23% of their responses mentioned the role of writing for future pursuits, making this the second most frequently cited reason for the purpose of writing in college for these students. Although the middle ability range students placed "expressing oneself" as the primary reason for writing in college (35%),[5] pragmatism seemed to color their attitude toward writing. As another student succinctly stated, "The better you write, the better you do.... [writing] is the edge one needs to succeed in life. That's why it's taught in school."

The students' responses to the question of the role of writing not only suggest that students are thinking about writing

beyond college but also indicate that the students recognize certain roles writing plays within academia. College instructors traditionally use writing to measure students' grasp of a subject--whether in essay tests, short papers, or research projects--yet all three ability level groups cited this very infrequently. Using writing as an evaluative measure made up only 19% of the responses for advanced writers, 17% for the mid-level writers, and 15% of the comments of developmental writers. While such a low response rate may suggest that few students--regardless of their ability--accept this as a legitimate purpose for writing in college courses, it also suggests a startling unfamiliarity with the academic process among first year students, a custom, perhaps, they need to become acculturated to in their first year writing classes to help them survive throughout college.

Of course, that few students cite evaluation as a reason for writing in college classes could also suggest that the students recognize higher purposes for writing, reasons that the critical thinking movement have tried to instill in students. Unfortunately, the survey indicates that this is not the case. Very few students recognized writing as a learning heuristic. More importantly, the students' responses correlated with their writing abilities. Only 17% of the advanced writers made reference to writing as a tool for learning among their reasons. According to a student in this ability group, students write "to better understand certain topics and clarify ideas, dig deeper

into a subject. . . ." Nine percent of the mid-ability level writers and only 4% of development writers ventured that we write to learn. But students among this small minority clearly recognized the greater cognitive value for writing. A developmental writer explained that students write "to become aware of your thoughts." A middle ability writer noted that we write "to increase our understanding of a subject." Reflecting a deeper understanding of the value of writing, a mid-ability level writer concluded that the reason for writing in college courses is "to expand one's knowledge and capacity for learning."

Although my survey represents only a small portion of Skidmore's student body and, like holistic assessment, is rooted to its home institution, the survey suggests that writing instructors can enter their developmental writing classes with more energy and optimism than may seem warranted by the students writing ability measures. Similarly, we might begin our advanced writing courses with a bit more caution and sensitivity than might need be expected for such students. Both in the classroom and in the profession, we should acknowledge that teaching the great masses of students placing into mid-ability writing classes possess hidden and demanding challenges. Although adopting a large scale survey of students' attitudes toward writing may be impractical, supplementing our current assessment measures with such information can bring us closer to the human spirit informing writers and writing.

Endnotes

1. Most recently, portfolio assessment has proven to be a successful alternative to these procedure for exit assessment at the end of a class or at the fulfillment of a writing requirement. Because portfolios typically present a variety of writings from the student, they provide a fuller picture of the writer. This same quality makes it more difficult to use portfolios for entrance assessment and placement. Experiments with portfolios for entering students have been conducted at the University of Minnesota. Several other colleges throughout the country are also exploring this possibility.

2. "Using the Test of Standard Written English to Place Student in Writing Courses." College Entrance and Examination Board. November 1989.

3. John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller present their seminal research using a Likert scale to measure writing apprehension in "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," Research in the Teaching of English, 1975, 242-249. Miles Myers provides an overview of approaches for assessing student attitudes towards writing in The Teacher-Researcher: How to Study Writing in the Classroom, Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1985, 111-118.

4. Question 2 focuses on students' understanding of writing so I have not included these results within my discussion on students' attitudes toward writing. The survey yielded five major characteristics of good writing: surface features (grammar, syntax, spelling, vocabulary), organization and structure, clarity of expression, creativity, and audience awareness. Clarity in writing was uniformly most highly valued by all three groups. Among advance writers, 31% of their comments praised clarity. The mid-ability writers also rated this item most frequently, at 28%. The developmental writers mentioned clarity in 24% of their responses. Using frequency of other terms to understand clarity, clear expression correlates with grammatically correct prose (Developmental: 36%, Mid-ability: 25%, and Advanced: 21%). Organization was cited third most often for the developmental writers (18%) and advanced writers (19%). Once again, the mid-ability group diverged from their peers on this point, mentioning organization only 17% of the time which placed it fourth among their responses.

Although in-coming composition students frequently express dismay upon learning that their expository writing class is not a creative writing course, creativeness ranked lowest as a characteristic of good writing for all groups (Developmental: 9%, Mid-ability: 9%, and Advanced: 14%). If writing instructors wish

to decrease the amount of lifeless, turgid prose students write, perhaps extra attention needs to be given to the relationship between expository writing and creativity and to the role of creativeness in all aspects of writing.

When responding to how they felt about writing (Question 1), many of the students cited the personal satisfaction they receive from writing, reinforcing the therapeutic value of writing for young adults. Not surprisingly, audience awareness ranked low among students. Although the mid-ability writers stated making connections to readers in 21% of their comments, only 14% of advanced writers and 13% of developmental writers acknowledged this vital rhetorical aspect of written communication. These results suggest that writing instructors need to continue to stress the role of audience awareness in shaping effective writing, especially for transaction, academic prose.

5. Similarly, the developmental writers and the advanced writers also stated "expressing oneself" most frequently in response to this question. Like the mid-ability writers, advanced writers listed "expression" most often when describing the purpose of writing in college classes (25%). For developmental writers, "expression" was mentioned in 30% of the responses, making it the second most cited reason for this group.

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