

The Role of a Mentor in Undergraduates' Research Writing Process

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Abstract

Many college and university students in Taiwan are required to take a research writing class prior to graduation. A majority of the undergraduate students generally work closely with their research writing instructors who know their research topics fairly well and can guide them on how to complete the research from start to finish. However, no single research has been solely dedicated to looking at the important role of the instructor (a mentor) in undergraduate students' research writing process in Taiwan. Furthermore, what should and can a mentor do to enhance undergraduate students' research writing experience does not exist in the current literature. As a result, the purpose of this research project is to find out undergraduate students' expectations for a mentor during their research writing. How a mentor affects students' research writing process will also be discussed. This study uses a qualitative research method to explore undergraduate students' expectations of a mentor and how mentoring influences their research writing experiences.

Keywords: Mentor, mentoring, research writing

Introduction

A relatively large number of researchers have looked at mentoring issues in the graduate school. However, few mentoring undergraduates' research writing studies can be found in the existing literature. To the present researcher's best knowledge, research that has empirically documented mentoring of undergraduates in Taiwan is limited and no research has solely been dedicated to investigating mentoring of undergraduates' research writing. In this paper, an overview of mentoring drawn from the existing literature is discussed and the role of a research writing mentor (instructor) perceived by undergraduate students will be reported as well.

Mentor and Mentoring Overview

Campbell & Campbell (1997) refer to mentoring as when a more experienced person provides information, support, and guidance to less experienced person. Similarly, Maack and Passet (1994) describe that a mentor is someone assisting junior staff members who are struggling with their first positions as post-doctoral academics, still trying to manage their careers, learning how to write and publish and how to prepare for tenure within higher education (as cited in Sengupta & Leung, 2002). Conversely, mentorship is an extended relationship between a professional or mentor and a student who is variously called a mentee, apprentice, intern, assistant, or protégé over period of time (Chan, 2000). Moreover, ideal mentors are those who would communicate openly, clearly, and effectively and provide honest good and bad feedback about mentees' works. Mentoring thus involves open communication and effective feedback (Rose, 2003).

For Powell (2005), mentoring is about creating relationships that help people grow and can have influences on a mentee. An effective mentor is aware of the issues college students encounter (Cramer and Prentice-Dunn, 2007). Berger (1992) and Jacobi (1991)

further confirm that supportive mentors have been cited as offering opportunities for growth of self-awareness and identity, resulting in increased assertiveness, positive presentation of self, and high career expectations (as cited in Bruce, 1995).

The present study defines a mentor as a research writing instructor who is willing to have individual meetings with students outside the classroom to discuss questions and problems that students were unable to resolve or clarify during their research writing process.

Mentor and Mentee Relationship

Mentors' and mentees' relationships have been an essential substance in assisting doctoral students' research writing. Mentor relationships between faculty and doctoral students do encourage collegiality and mutual responsibility for learning (Gibson & Bannerman, 1997). Interacting with students' cohorts will facilitate them achieve independence and a sense of competence (Bruce, 1995). In addition, mentors should assist doctoral students to familiarize their new roles and identities and to direct them through the new and dark doctoral process (Cobb, Fox, Many, Matthews, McGrail, Tinker Sachs, et al., 2006). In fact, the quality of interaction with the faculty mentor is central to students' ultimate satisfaction within the doctoral experience, especially in mentoring minority Mexican-American and Native American doctoral students (Williamson & Fenske, 1992).

Similarly, the major advisor was also found to play a substantial role in the academic life, satisfaction and career preparation of African American doctoral students (Holland, 1993). Surprisingly, Paglis, Green, and Bauer (2006) found that interacting with a faculty mentor may even have a negative effect on doctoral students' attitudes about their career choices. Their study indicated that exposure to the reality a professor's

life during graduate study actually turn some doctoral students away from pursuing a research-oriented academic career.

Female doctoral students in Smith (1995) study categorize faculty as 5 different kinds: those who want to shape students in their own image; those who want to help students find their own voice and discover their relationship to research; those who are too busy with their own agendas to even notice the student; those who are expressly harsh and malicious toward students; and those who use students to serve their own agendas. Therefore, the prospect of finding a mentor can be complex and intimidating especially for new graduate students (Rose, 2003). Moreover, Holland (1993) indicated that doctoral students and the major advisors' interactions could be "business-like."

Sadly, one Mexican-American female in Williamson (1994) study was insulted by a female professor of a different ethnic background who proclaimed her being in the doctoral program was beyond her imagination based on the project and work she did. Perhaps it is indeed beyond the professor's imagination if she knew that the Mexican American female's project of which she disapproved was actually published three years later. Obviously, faculty can act as gatekeepers and mentors depending on they want to make or break a student (Smith, 1995). Perhaps that is the reason why all the psychologists in the Jacks, Chubin, Porter, and Connolly's (1993) study cited problems with their doctoral committees or advisors as a major reason for doctoral students failing to complete their dissertations.

In conclusion, Williamson (1994) indicated that mentor relationships were highly significant in contributing to doctoral satisfaction; however, the present researcher also believes that, at the undergraduate level, advisors, mentors and professors should provide everything students need to complete their research or studies. However, in a Bean,

Readence, Barone, and Sylvester (2004) case study on a mentor and a mentee relationship, one participant has different point of view toward mentor and mentee relationships. She asserts that she will collaborate and mentor her mentee, but she won't step forward to provide all the support and directions her mentee need. She believes students have to do it on their own and they have to know where, besides her, to get the answer.

Methodology

For studies that focus on insight, discovery, and interpretation of issues not fully developed, the use of qualitative methods is important (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, Kuo (2003) indicates that when researchers want to understand a group of people or an existing problem in great depth, but do not want to spend too much time in the field or with the subjects, using qualitative survey research is a good way to gather huge amounts of information of the phenomenon they intend to understand. Therefore, the present researcher believes that the qualitative research is a suitable method to better understand the role of a mentor in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) college students' research writing process. Therefore, a qualitative survey was conducted in an effort to help gather more detail data. In addition, qualitative survey approach gives participants the voice to express their true feelings, rather than forcing them to choose the closest answer in a quantitative survey. The survey questions were developed by modifying and reviewing of a similar study designed by the present researcher in 2007 (Kuo & Jiau, 2008).

Participants in the present study were from three research writing classes taught by the same teacher, the present researcher. To collect the survey data, 70 students were invited to complete the survey. Only one student didn't complete the survey. As soon as the data were collected, all of the data were organized and typed according to the survey questions. For example, one question in the survey asks the participants to indicate their

expectations for a mentor (their research writing instructor), thus, each individual's first response were organized together in the category of expectations for a mentor, the present researcher.

Initially, the present researcher just skimmed through the survey results to have a basic understanding of the data and tried to get a basic perspective of the participants' perceptions and expectations of a/the mentor. Then, the researcher started to create codes that emerged from the survey questions. The codes were words, phrases, short or long sentences. The codes provided the present researcher with the opportunity to reduce the amount of data so that it was easier to help her to read and to see any emerging themes in the data. The researcher continued to code and to recode the data throughout the duration of the data analysis process.

Results & Discussions

The results revealed that participants in this study indicated a mentor is someone like a pilot who can direct, instruct, advise and guide students to complete their research papers. One participant even described a mentor as a mother or manager who expects his/her children or artists to succeed in the future/career. Participants also believed a mentor should be someone who is patient, understanding, and encouraging in helping students complete their research papers. More specifically, participants in this study expect their research writing instructor (the mentor) to help them do the following things: find a topic and narrow down their research topics; form research questions; find related literatures; strengthen their writing abilities, and complete their research projects.

First of all, students feel a need to choose and narrow down a topic. After completing the first class of "Finding a Topic," participants need teachers' help in narrowing down a topic to a manageable scope. The majority of the students in this study

indicated a mentor should be able to help them brainstorm research ideas, choose topics, and narrow down the topics. Therefore, a mentor can help students narrow down their topics by doing general to specific practice. After all, probably most students, particularly undergraduates, don't have a sense of that tradeoff.

For example, a student wants to study challenges that international students encounter in the United States. His or her research writing instructor (the mentor) can make the point quickly about that there are a lot of international students studying in the United States and help the student to define a question and a sample to use. Then the mentor can discuss what can be generalized from the sample. For instance, if the sample is just Taiwanese students, it is hard to generalize to all Asian students. Generally, people would like researchers to come up with general findings that apply to a lot of people, but sometimes the resources don't permit a big enough study. Therefore, the student's research writing instructor (the mentor) should help him or her balance what is achievable in terms of a study with what can be learned from the study in terms of its generality.

Furthermore, it is also very important for mentors to emphasize to students that they are not doing a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation. On the other hand, they ought to choose a realistic topic that would not take years to finish. Furthermore, telling students not to change topics like changing their dirty clothes is also rather important. Preserving the approved topics by the teachers until they get their research done is a must.

Second, students generally are unsure about whether their research questions are acceptable and feasible. Thus, they expect a mentor to be someone who can help in forming research questions that will ask the critical element that they desire to ask in their research studies. For example, Fernando and Hulse-Killacky (2006) present an invert triangle visual to help doctoral students develop a dissertation research question. They

identify specific steps for students to follow. The first step focuses on what students want to know. The second step targets the intention of the research. Then, students spent a great deal of time doing literature reviews to find out what has been or has not been reported in the literature. On the other hand, in the research question formation stage, students suggested that a mentor guide them in formulating a conceptual definition of the key research idea, turning it into a question, and finalizing the research question. To help students forming the research questions, an easy way is to ask students to brainstorm what they want to find out the most in their research.

Third, library search assistance is another expectation students have for a mentor. Participants in this study said they generally have difficulties finding the literature they need that is written in the English language. It is especially true when students have a lack of sufficient knowledge on researching the literature. Thus, students in the current study found that the librarian's tutorial their mentor (the researcher) arranged for their class to be helpful to students who had no previous experience in information search for research writing. Obviously, taking the advantage of the service provided by the school library will assist students' in finding available online resources from the school library databases.

Last, the majority of the students who do take the research writing are seniors. Supposedly, those English major seniors should have confidence in their writing ability, but many of them hope their mentor can strengthen their writing skills. More importantly, students hope mentors will help them write a good research paper. However, undergraduates are not the only group that encounters writing difficulties. Di Pierro (2007) found that even doctoral students often struggle in silence with issues in writing literature reviews. The suggested procedure includes searching relevant literature, comprehending

the main idea of the literature, taking notes and quotes, writing summaries, categorizing literature, evaluating if a source is worthwhile to be included, writing up a literature review based on the research question, and deciding the critical content of these researches' methods, design, analysis and implications. Seemingly, effective paraphrasing is the most difficult part in research writing, especially for undergraduates (Shirley, 2004). In Shirley's study, many students understand how to summarize literature review, yet sometimes entire blocks of quotations appear in their essays. As the result, Shirley emphasized the importance of teaching students what paraphrasing is, and how to paraphrase in their own research-based papers.

In addition, students in this current study encountered difficulty in writing summaries of Chinese sources in English, especially when Chinese words, phrases, or concepts can't be translated into the English language. If the sources are in English, students have difficulties in first understanding technical terminology of the literature in English before writing summaries and critical comments. Students also have problems in organizing literature reviews into logical orders and suitable categories. Thus, students in this study hope their mentors will train them how to think in English and be able to write in accurate, grammatical, and fluent English to present all parts of a research paper. Many students expressed their dislike of taking research writing. Their mentors also found it a challenge to read students' research writing and provide them specific comments. Jensen, Martin, Mann, and Fogarty (2004) echoed that "many faculty members believe editing documents for spelling, grammar, a specific writing format style, and scientific writing style is not their responsibility; consequently, papers are read with only content and data analysis in mind" (p. 44).

In short, Manis, Frazier, Kouassi, Hollenshead, and Burkam (1993) surveyed graduate students at one prestigious university about the quality of the graduate experiences. They reported that one of the most frequently cited sources of delay in time to degree was the lack of adequate mentoring or advising. No wonder students in this study expect their mentor (their research writing class instructor) to do a lot for them during their research process. This is so because students found that one-on-one consultation with their teachers was particularly helpful in narrowing down a topic and getting their questions answered.

Conclusion

This study found that students expect a mentor to help them find and narrow down their research topics, strengthen their writing abilities, complete research projects, and find related literatures during the research writing process. More importantly, they hope a mentor will patiently provide step-by-step pedagogical guidelines from brainstorming the topic to writing up a good research paper in details. In addition to the guidance from a mentor, students may rely on resources that will assist in their writing, including choosing a topic, doing library research, writing an outline, taking notes, writing a rough draft, and editing and polishing the final paper (Everhart, 1994). In short, to the present researcher's best knowledge, there aren't many studies of this kind in the Taiwan. Hopefully, it may stimulate more researchers' interest in this area and nurture more mentors willingly to teach and assist undergraduates' research writing. The present researcher indeed hopes the study results will shed light on helping teachers involved in mentoring research writing to develop pedagogical mentoring strategies to assist students in completing research papers.

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