

Understanding the Complexities of
Prior Knowledge

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the kinds of prior knowledge students bring with them from high school as it relates to the conventions of writing that they are expected to follow in ARTS 1110 Introduction to University. The research questions were “Can first-year students taking the Arts 1110 Introduction to University course articulate their prior knowledge about how to write an essay? and, “How do students use their prior knowledge when they learn how to write an argumentative essay in ARTS 1110? Data was gathered using a one time paper and pencil survey that consisted of a combination of open-ended and closed questions. The results indicated that students bring with them some knowledge of the terms used such as thesis statement, research, and counter-argument but that they often have only a superficial understanding of what the terms actually mean and how to use them in an essay. The results indicate that if students are to be successful at university they have to gain an understanding of what the terms mean and how they are used in each course they take.

Introduction

The importance of students being able to access their prior knowledge when faced with a new learning situation, such as writing an academic essay, is supported by Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) who found that students make use of prior knowledge in a variety of ways, with some students adapting their prior knowledge to the new situation while other students persistently hold onto their prior knowledge and try to fit the new situation into what they already know. Students who do not adapt their prior knowledge to new situations identify themselves as experts and as such tend to develop less as writers in the long term than those who are willing to accept a temporary novice status (Sommers & Salz, 2004). Sommers and Salz (2004) reported that students who see themselves as experts are more attached to prior habits and strategies and are often less willing to try new procedures if they run contrary to what worked for them in the past. In addition, the students who identified themselves as poor writers were more open to adapting their prior knowledge and developed more as writers over the term (Sommers & Salz, 2004).

Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) reported that students are often not conscious of how they use prior knowledge except when explicitly questioned. Similarly Wardle (2007) found that students are not always able to talk about the knowledge and skills they can transfer from one writing situation to another. Correspondingly, Saddler and Graham (2007) theorized that less skilled writers do not take advantage of their prior knowledge when writing because that knowledge is poorly integrated which limits how it can be applied.

Saddler and Graham (2007) further hypothesized that knowledge is an important factor in writing development. They pointed out that every major model of writing in the past 25 years identified the importance of knowledge in composing. Saddler and Graham stated that writers

access different types of knowledge such as “knowledge about the writing topic, intended audience, genre, task, and linguistic elements” (p. 232). It was this knowledge about the writing task that helped identify which writers were going to be successful and which ones were not going to be successful when approaching a new learning task. Similarly, Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) examined how students negotiate between what they know from their previous writing experiences and their expectations of new academic contexts. They wanted to discover what prior writing knowledge students use, which knowledge they hold on to, and which knowledge they are most likely to change to adapt to the new writing challenges they face. The authors concluded that students are “more or less able to find the precise language for reporting on what previous experience they are drawing on when confronted with more or less difficult tasks” (p. 333). Further, they reported that having students talk about the different genres they wrote in high school prompted metacognitive reflections that allowed students to take the knowledge they knew about different genres and adapt that knowledge to the new writing situations they faced in first-year writing courses.

This is consistent with the findings of Applebee (1984) and Hillocks (1986) who found that students tend to remember information that is in harmony with their prior knowledge and that they tend to default to prior knowledge when completing assignments. This might be one of the problems faced by first-year students when their instructors are asking them to replace existing knowledge with new knowledge that may run contrary to what they understand. It might be more effective for instructors to build upon the knowledge that students bring with them from high school rather than attempting to introduce new structures for the same concepts (O’Brien Moran, 2013).

Instructors of first-year students face many challenges when attempting to move students from their comfortable paradigms and practices to new and unfamiliar ones (O'Brien Moran, 2013). O'Brien Moran (2013) observed that when teaching first-year students to adjust their writing practices to accord with the changed expectations of college and university, instructors are asking students both to transfer their existing knowledge of writing to a new writing situation and to modify and adapt that knowledge. As noted above, such modification to existing practices can be difficult for students. This study attempted to probe students understanding of prior knowledge and how that knowledge could help them in their ARTS 1110 Introduction to University course.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the kinds of prior knowledge students bring with them from high school as it relates to the conventions of writing that they are expected to follow in ARTS 1110 Introduction to University. What students bring to university in terms of writing knowledge is an area of study that I have long been interested in. When I get first-year students in my classroom most of the students fall into one of three categories: (1) those students who did extremely well in their high school English classes. They routinely received marks over 80% on most of their assignments; (2) the second group who did not do as well in high school English classes and who were used to receiving marks in the 60-70% range; and, (3) the third group who received marks under 60%. I have found, over the years, that the students who are from the third group seem to do better on their first assignments than the other two groups because they do not have as much prior knowledge about writing conventions. This lack of prior knowledge works to their advantage when learning something new because it does

not limit them to do things the way they were used to doing them in high school. The students from the first two groups cling to what they already know for the first essay but are able to adapt for the second essay which seems to indicate that they come to terms with their prior knowledge and are able to figure out what they can keep and what needs to be adjusted.

In the 2013 Fall term, students from Arts 1110 were invited to participate in completing a survey that asked them questions designed to discover their prior knowledge about how to write an argumentative essay which is the essay students are asked to write in ARTS 1110. Wu (2006) discovered in his research that the argumentative essay is the most common genre that undergraduate students are asked to write. Similarly, Lea and Street (1998) contend that the development of an argument is regarded as a key feature of successful writing by academics.

Methodology

In undertaking this study, I selected the University of Manitoba's *Introduction to University* course. This is a three-credit, 13 week course, designed to help students make the transition from high school to university. It is an interdisciplinary course on academic writing, research, and critical thinking. The course covers academic writing and research skills, and it identifies ways for students to learn and study more efficiently. Students are required to write two 1500 word argumentative essays over the course of the term.

The course includes a weekly lecture of one hour and fifteen minutes which is taught by an instructor and a weekly writing seminar of one hour and fifteen minutes facilitated by a teaching assistant. Each section is comprised of approximately 120 students who are divided into seminar groups of approximately 30 students. The lecture portion of the course is characterized by lectures on concepts and content while the writing seminar sections are characterized by

discussions of the application of concepts and opportunities to use those concepts in the students' own writing assignments. There is a direct connection between the content of the lectures and the activities in the writing seminars.

The course has a wide range of students enrolled, both in terms of educational background, prior experience with writing, age of students, and future career directions. In addition, this course is often taken in the first semester of university. The research questions were "Can first-year students taking the Arts 1110 Introduction to University course articulate their prior knowledge about how to write an essay? and, "How do students use their prior knowledge when they learn how to write an argumentative essay in ARTS 1110?"

Subjects/Participants

In September 2013, students from six sections of the University of Manitoba's *Introduction to University* course were invited to participate in the study by completing a survey asking them what they knew and understood about different writing protocols. A total of 582 participants filled in the survey. Participants were asked, on the survey, if they had attended a high school in Canada and only those students who had attended a high school in Canada were chosen to participate as I was mainly interested in what students learned about writing in their Canadian high schools. International students typically have different curriculums and were thus excluded on that basis. All participants were made aware of the parameters of the study before they took part in the study.

Procedures

On the first day of classes in September 2013, each student, who was enrolled in ARTS 1110 for the Fall term, was invited to participate in the study by filling in a onetime paper and

pencil survey. The survey included 21 questions measuring their prior knowledge concerning the following topics: thesis statements, argumentative essays, conducting research, their understanding of the five-paragraph essay, and if they had learned how to format a paper. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Research Instrument

The research instrument, appended as Appendix A, was a onetime paper and pencil survey, analyzed quantitatively. The survey asked first-year students to define writing terms and concepts that have been identified through writing research as important terms to understand when writing an argumentative essay. There were 21 questions in total. Ten of the questions were yes/no questions which sought to determine students' knowledge of the terms used in ARTS 1110 pertaining to argumentative essays; one question asked students to indicate their comfort in writing an essay, and ten of the questions asked students to define terms. The survey was designed to not only get an idea of whether students knew the terms associated with essays but to also determine if they understood the terms. Thus the open-ended questions attempted to find out what previous writing experiences the students had, the instruction they received in high school, and their expectations of writing environments at university.

Data Analysis

Data was collected through a one-time survey. The survey was analyzed quantitatively. Each item was analyzed separately using frequency distribution. The use of frequency distribution percentages allowed me to determine what prior knowledge students identified as being familiar when writing an essay. Trochim (2006) stated that descriptive statistics allow a researcher to draw inferences about populations and to estimate the parameters of those

populations. In addition, the use of descriptive statistics permits some degree of generalization from a selected sample to the population. The results reported here are drawn from self-reported data and are reported strictly as descriptive percentages.

Results

The first question on the survey asked students if they had ever written a thesis statement. The second question asked students to identify their understanding of what a thesis statement was in the context of writing an essay. The reason for the two questions was to firstly identify if students had heard the term used in their previous writing instruction and then to determine if they could also articulate a meaning for the term. Andrews (1995) defined argument as: “a process of argumentation, a connected series of statements intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one) position” (p. 3). Toulmin, Reike, and Janik (1984) defined it similarly as “the sequence of interlinked claims and reasons that, between them, establish content and force of the position for which a particular speaker is arguing” (p. 14). Similarly, Wingate (2012) defined argument as having three components: “(1) the analysis and evaluation of content knowledge, (2) the writer’s development of a position, and, (3) the presentation of that position in a coherent manner” (p. 146). These definitions each indicate the importance of the thesis statement in an argumentative essay. The survey results in this study showed that 79% of the students said that they had written a thesis statement in high school. When asked to define a thesis statement only 67% of the students could define a thesis statement. The criteria for the definition was very broad and the two main answers provided by the students were that thesis statements were the main idea in the essay (32%) and that thesis statements were claims supported by evidence (14%). Other answers presented for the definition of a thesis that

were accepted and were representative included more general definitions such as a thesis statement presents enough information to the reader for them to know what the piece of writing is about, a quick summary of an essay topic, and a definition of what the essay will be about (21%).

When asked if they had ever written an argumentative essay, which is the essay of choice in ARTS 1110, 62% said that they had written an argumentative essay in high school. When asked to define an argumentative essay 32% said that it meant having a point of view and defending it; 29% defined it as an essay that is meant to persuade the reader about a topic; and, 14% said that it was an essay that was supported by evidence. This is similar to what Wingate (2012) discovered in her own study of first-year undergraduate students where the majority of the students did not mention key aspects of argumentation as she had defined it. The students, in her study, did not seem to be aware of the need to evaluate and analyze sources; less than half of the students mentioned the need for evidence and only eight the need for analysis. In the present study only 14% of the students identified that an argumentative essay should have evidence to support the claims being made. Likewise, Wingate (2012) found that 34 (out of 101) students defined an argumentative essay as stating your personal point of view using opinion, 39 (out of 101) defined it as an argument having two sides, while 15 (out of 101) said that an argumentative essay had more than two sides. Forty-eight (out of 101) students defined argumentative writing as providing evidence. Wingate concluded that:

the student answers revealed that many had concepts of argument that were either partial, or too narrow, or inappropriate for the genre 'essay' as required at university. This finding shows the need to teach the formal schemata of essay writing early on in the

university programme, and to eradicate some misconceptions from students' previous writing experience. (p. 149)

Since ARTS 1110 teaches students how to conduct research it was important to ask students if they had ever written a paper that required them to conduct research. Eighty-nine percent of the students reported that they had conducted research in high school when writing essays. When asked where they had found the research 79% said they had found information on the internet with a further 7% saying that they relied on Google, and 2% who said that they used Wikipedia exclusively for their research. Seventy-seven percent said that they used books which included encyclopedias, textbooks, and the use of the library. A further thirty-two percent mentioned finding research using surveys, teachers, magazines, newspapers, journal articles, videos, and television.

In their study Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford (2011) found that "students have little sense of the difference between a magazine and a journal, or, things that they can find anywhere online, and they have no way of sorting through all that . . . to most students, secondary research means that you go collect a bunch of stuff and put it together" (p. 78). The authors also found that students say they know how to do research but they really don't. The faculty members, who participated in Brockman et al's. study, reported that "if I give any type of assignment that needs background information, they go to the internet, copy it, paste it into their papers and don't write it" (p. 78). The focus group comments from the faculty members reinforced just how important it is for students to be able to use sources in their writing, however, students do not appear to understand how to incorporate materials into their writing, either to provide supporting evidence or to generate a thesis.

When asked to discuss what their definition of providing research in an essay was, 80% of the students, in the present study, said that it involved them citing the sources where they got the evidence used in their essays, and 11% said that it was finding information to use in their essays. The reason for reporting the results separately, even though they appear to be related, is that I wanted to keep the concept of providing evidence separate from just providing information. Providing evidence indicates that the students were aware that they had to back up their claims with evidence while providing information does not have the same burden of proof that is necessary in an argumentative essay. These results are similar to the research findings of Brockman et al. (2011) who found that even though students admitted that they had conducted research for their essays they did not appear to understand which information would be considered scholarly and proof of their claims and which just provided information on the topic.

A question on counter-argument was included because students are asked to include a counter-argument when writing their argumentative essays. It is important for students to be able to look critically at their argument and ask themselves why a reasonable person might disagree with their argument. When asked if they knew what a counter-argument was, 53% said they did know what a counter-argument was. When students were asked to define the counter-argument, 60% said that the counter-argument was arguing against the main argument in an attempt to show both sides of the argument, and 6% said that it was to indicate how the opponent's side was wrong.

Nussbaum and Schraw (2007) defined a counter-argument as “a claim that refutes a counterclaim by demonstrating that the counter-argument is invalid, lacks as much force or

correctness as the original argument, or rests on a false assumption” (p. 71). They discuss the benefits of counter-arguments in an essay by stating:

good arguments typically have multiple sides, thus presenting students with opportunities to engage in deeper processing. Deeper processing is more likely to occur when students consider counterarguments to their own (or others) arguments and integrate their arguments and counterarguments into an overall final position. (p. 60)

The authors go on to say that students often do not understand that considering an opposing side often increases the strength of their own argument. Nussbaum and Schraw offer three reasons why it is important to integrate a counter-argument in an essay: (1) the process requires students not only to make arguments, but also to examine how arguments including counter-arguments are related; (2) counter-arguments make written assignments logically stronger; and (3) setting up the argument-counter-argument structure is central to critical thinking. In ARTS 1110, critical thinking is an important part of the overall course goals, therefore, teaching students how to include a counter-argument into their essays allows them to use more sophisticated thinking.

Students were then asked if they thought it would be appropriate to state their opinion when writing an argumentative essay. Forty-five percent said that they would be able to state their opinion because that is what an argumentative essay meant, that they would have to give their opinion. Eleven percent said that they had very strong opinions and therefore it made sense that they would give their opinions in an essay. Twenty-three percent of the students said that their opinion was not acceptable in an argumentative essay and that they would have to find research to back up the claims they made in the essay and not rely on their own opinions. These results are not surprising considering Nussbaum and Schraw (2007) found that high school

instructors typically teach persuasive writing rather than analytical writing. The teachers expect students to develop and defend a particular point of view, rather than explore different points of view. This also ties in with the students' definition of an argumentative essay from this study where 32% said that an argumentative essay involved stating a point of view and 29% said an argumentative essay was designed to persuade readers.

I was also interested in finding out how comfortable students were in writing an essay. Seventeen percent admitted that they were not comfortable writing an essay, 68% were somewhat comfortable writing an essay, and 9% felt very comfortable writing an essay. These findings are not congruent with the *Survey of Early Leavers* study conducted at the University of Manitoba (2007), where sixty percent of first-year students rated their written communication as good or excellent; only 4% considered that they had poor written communication skills when they enrolled at the university. Similarly, in a research report entitled *First-year students' undergraduate experience at Canadian Universities* (2011), 88% of University of Manitoba students self-reported feeling confident that they were able to meet the academic demands of first-year university. In addition, 89% felt that they were performing adequately in written assignments. It is interesting to note that the perceptions' of these first-year students indicates that they are fairly confident of their academic abilities when coming to university, including their writing ability. The findings, from this study, were not supported by the previous studies although it is difficult to make cross comparisons considering the language we used in this study. Some students might not have felt comfortable writing an essay but also did not feel uncomfortable writing an essay so chose the middle 'somewhat comfortable' prompt.

I was curious as to how many students learned how to write an essay following the formulaic five-paragraph model that is generic in high school settings (Applebee, 1984; McCormick, 2006). Seventy-six percent said that they had learnt how to write using the five-paragraph model, and 81% of the students surveyed defined the five paragraph essay as having an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. While the five-paragraph model has its place in teaching students how to organize an essay it differs from that expected at university. Relying on the five-paragraph essay can cause problems for the students when they arrive at university because of the different practices of the academy (Hyland, 2013). Hyland (2013) further states that the new practices often confuse first-year students because they force students into roles, identities, and ways of writing that run counter to their experiences and intuitions about how language is used.

Another question asked students to define when it was appropriate to use the five-paragraph essay model. Twelve percent said it was always appropriate, 23% said it was useful for writing short essays, 18% believed it would be beneficial when writing an argumentative essay, and 8% said it was only helpful when writing essays in high school where papers tended to be shorter. Brockman et al. (2011) found in their study of university faculty's perceptions of writing in their disciplines that not one faculty member mentioned the five-paragraph essay in their discussions as being essential in college writing. They did not reference it as an academic form, not as a stepping stone, and not as an organizational strategy.

Applebee (1984) characterized the five-paragraph essay as an "organizational model into which she [the writer] must slot whatever information is required for the task" (p. 105). Twenty-nine percent of the students surveyed in this study said that the five-paragraph model was

beneficial because it provided a structure that they could use when developing their essay.

Applebee suggested that structured models, like the five-paragraph essay, instruct students in the shape of the product providing them with a sense of what they are meant to produce. This kind of instruction does not, however, provide explicit instruction in procedure and rarely leads to the students' understanding of the purpose of writing. Similarly, Dean (2000) found that students and teachers liked the five-paragraph model because it was predictable and easy to follow.

In an effort to discover what students expected in terms of writing in university students were asked if they thought they could use the five paragraph essay model in first-year university. Forty-two percent thought they could use the model in university. When asked to give reasons why it might or might not be effective, 29% said it would be useful because it provided a clear structure for how to organize an essay, while 44% said that the model would not be suitable because essays in university required more depth than a five paragraph essay would provide. Brockman et al. (2011) reported that faculty members thought that students:

should understand that when they arrive on campus, they won't know everything when it comes to college writing no matter how well their teachers taught them. Instead, they'll arrive at college and then continue to grow as writers . . . as they constantly face new literacy challenges in unfamiliar academic terrains. . . this idea might be unsettling to some students, particularly straight A students who regard the academic enterprise not as a process or journey of discovery, but as a game or hoop already figured out, un fait accompli. (p. 79-80)

Bone and Reid (2011) said that prior academic achievement has been found to have a large effect on the performance and success of students in their first year of university. The

authors further found that “the drop in grades from high school to university might be attributable in part to changes in the learning environment; students’ expectations about what university will be like and other transitional issues” (p. 720). The drop in grades can be quite a shock to students who did particularly well in high school and the authors discovered that “students with high expectations of their own academic ability, based largely on advanced levels of achievement at secondary school, can attain lower first-year grades than those with average or low expectations” (p. 720). Anecdotally, as mentioned previously, these are the same results found in the ARTS 1110 course. Students who have been successful in high school often do poorly on their first essay assignment.

We then asked four questions about formatting papers. Fifty-five percent of the students said that they knew what it meant to format a paper. Fifty-three percent said that they had been taught how to format a paper in high school. Forty-three percent of the students defined formatting a paper as following a certain structure that pertained to such things as title page, spacing, borders, and references pages. Seventeen percent defined formatting a paper as knowing how to put citations into the paper. When asked what kinds of things they had to pay attention to when formatting a paper, 39% said the structure of the essay while 24% said citations. These answers showcase the simplicity of what formatting means to the students. They did not mention the complexity of formatting which does not only involve citing sources, but includes an understanding of how to construct a title page, pagination, references page, in-text citations, margins, and font size. Some students (4%) did mention all of these elements of how to format a paper but the majority of the students have a very surface understanding of what formatting a paper means.

When students were asked what they had learned about writing in high school that they could transfer to university 33% said they had learned how to cite references, 9% said they had learned how to write using the five paragraph essay which they felt would be beneficial in university because of the structure of the essay, 8% said they had learned grammar which included spelling, 7% learned how to write a thesis statement, and 14% learned other things like how to avoid plagiarizing, how to find research, how to write introductions and conclusions, how to avoid the use of first person and contractions, how to paraphrase and summarize, how to edit, how to use transitions, and how to prepare outlines.

Some of the students (approximately 10%) expressed the belief that they had not learnt anything in high school that they would find useful in university. These findings are consistent with the research of Soiferman (2012) who interviewed first-year students about their perceptions of high school writing instruction. She found that six of 14 students interviewed stated that they had not learned as much about the process of writing as they would have liked. In addition, ten out of the 14 students perceived that they had not been adequately prepared in high school for university writing. The areas they felt they had not received instruction in related to formatting essays, how to use evidence, and how to cite references. This data is consistent with the findings of the present study where only 33% reported that they had learned how to cite sources in high school.

Discussion and Conclusions

The research presented in this study sought to determine the kinds of prior knowledge students bring with them from high school concerning essay writing, and more specifically the argumentative essay. The study was conducted to gather this information because over the years

it became increasingly clear that even though the students professed to know the terms they did not understand what the terms meant or how to apply them when writing their essays. As the instructor I often find that the students' prior knowledge can either be beneficial or can hinder them when they are attempting to acquire new information concerning how to write an argumentative essay. Schaap, Schmidt and Verkoeljen (2012) reported that "initial learning is known to be positively correlated with the level of prior knowledge, class attendance, and sometimes study time . . ." (p. 877). They further point out that prior knowledge differs from the level of initial learning because prior knowledge is the knowledge that students possess prior to enrolling in a curriculum. They further hypothesized that the amount of prior knowledge can positively affect the level of initial learning but only if the students' prior knowledge is correct. Shapiro (2004) endorses the idea of prior knowledge as a kind of cognitive structure that lays the foundation for new learning. Therefore, first-year instructors can help facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge by pointing out what the students already know on the subject and explaining the way in which the new information builds on the prior knowledge.

The findings reported in this paper provide evidence for the need to take into account students' prior knowledge of writing when they come to university. The answers provided on the surveys indicate that some students come to university with partial or incorrect concepts of argument and with formal schemata that do not help them write appropriately in the expected genre. The findings further indicate that the students may know the terminology of argument but do not necessarily have more than a surface understanding of what the terminology means. This is a problem especially when we take for granted that our students know more than they do just because they indicate that they have heard the word before coming to university. Wingate

(2012) theorized that “the fact that argumentation is a key requirement of essay writing is obscured through the use of vague language and an emphasis on surface features” (p. 153). Term after term the teaching assistants and I observe that students spend a great deal of their time learning how to format their paper even though that portion of their mark is only worth 10% of their total grade. The fact that 43% of the students indicated that formatting meant learning how to structure an essay shows that students think they know what it means to format an essay but the evidence does not support that view.

There was also some concern regarding what students know about writing an argumentative essay and the importance of providing evidence. Only 14% indicated that an argumentative essay was an essay that required evidence to support their claims. Many of the students indicated that an argumentative essay was used to prove their point of view (32%) or was used to persuade their readers on the basis of opinion (29%). This would also explain why 56% of the students indicated that either it would be okay to state their opinion (45%) in an argumentative essay, or that because they had strong opinions (11%) that they would be able to use those opinions in an argumentative essay.

In addition, 67% of the students could define a thesis statement but anecdotally did not appear to know how to write a thesis statement. This supports the view that students may have heard the words and know, in a superficial manner, what the words mean but cannot apply that knowledge to formulate an effective thesis statement. We have seen this in the ARTS 1110 course where students are asked to draft a preliminary thesis statement and despite saying they knew how to write a thesis statement show that they, in fact, have no idea what makes a good thesis statement. It is especially frustrating because the students are given guidance in how to

draft a thesis statement in the writing seminars by the teaching assistants before they have to formulate their own. Each term, the teaching assistants find that over half of their students are not able to articulate what it is they are going to be arguing in their essay.

In terms of where students go to conduct research it is not surprising that 79% of them rely on the internet for their information. The problem with this approach is that students do not appear to understand what information they can use and what information is not useful to them in terms of providing scholarly evidence in their essays. As Brockman et al. (2011) found students do not comprehend the differences between magazines and journals and tend to treat all material as if it was of the same quality. Their understanding of what it means to conduct research is based on their prior knowledge of what they may have used in high school but that definition is no longer correct. This leads to difficulties when writing essays because the students are often surprised to discover that they cannot just google their topic. They have to be able to evaluate the sources they want to use. It is the evaluation part which appears to cause them difficulty because they have never had to evaluate sources before.

The prior knowledge that students bring to university varies greatly as does the understanding of how to use that knowledge. This study provided evidence that students are familiar with the names of the terms that are used in the course but demonstrated that the knowledge of those terms is superficial and provides only a surface understanding of what the terms actually mean in relation to writing an argumentative essay. The findings of this study indicate that if instructors are going to make use of students' prior knowledge they have to ensure that the students understand the terms that are going to be used in their respective courses. Instructors cannot assume that just because the students have heard of the terms or have used

them in high school that they understand how the terms will be used in each course at university. One of the recommendations that came out of this study is to make university instructors aware that if they expect students to meet their course expectations than the students need to understand the terms that will be used. .

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that only one course in one university was used to gather the data. However, based on the review of literature, many of the findings are supported by the findings of other research based studies concerning prior knowledge. The study was also limited to the kinds of prior knowledge questions that are pertinent to the ARTS 1110 course. For example, no questions were asked as to what types of writing students were familiar with which might have yielded results that would have explained their knowledge of what an argumentative essay was, and their reliance on web-based research.

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Appendix A **First Year Students' Writing Knowledge Survey**



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

First Year Students' Writing Knowledge Survey

Name _____ (please print) Student Number _____

Did you attend high school in Canada? Yes No

1. Have you ever written a thesis statement? Yes No

2. Define what you mean by a thesis statement.

3. Have you ever written an argumentative essay? Yes No

4. Define what you mean by an argumentative essay.

5. Have you ever written a paper that required you to conduct research? Yes No

6. Where did you find the research that you used in your essay?

7. What is your definition of providing research in an essay?

8. Do you know what a counter-argument is? Yes No

9. Define what you think is meant by a counter-argument.

10. Do you think you will be able to state your opinion when writing an argumentative essay?

Yes

No

Why or why not?

11. How comfortable are you in writing an essay?

Not comfortable Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

12. Were you taught how to write an essay in high school using the 5 paragraph essay model?

Yes No

13. Define what you mean by the 5 paragraph essay.

14. Define when it is appropriate to use a five paragraph essay model.

15. Do you think you can use the 5 paragraph essay model in first-year university? Yes No

16. Why do you think it will or won't be effective?

17. Do you know what it means to format a paper? Yes No

18. Have you ever been taught how use a particular formatting style? (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago Style). Yes No

19. Explain what formatting a paper means to you.

20. What are some things that you would have to pay attention to when formatting a paper?

21. List anything that you learnt about writing in high school that you think you can transfer to your writing class in first-year university?
