Connecting Practice & Research: From Tacit to Explicit Disciplinary Writing Instruction

By Jodi P. Lampi and Todd Reynolds

In this "Connecting Practice & Research" column, we present a brief glimpse of the challenges and issues on the writing side of disciplinary literacy. A quick review of literature on academic and disciplinary writing provides an understanding of how the view of academic writing as a rudimentary and technical practice led the way into expanding views of learning to include social and situated learning; these are now present in the view of and issues about disciplinary writing. However, students' struggles transferring writing composition processes from composition courses to content-area courses require more explicit instruction of writing in college.

Writing As a "Mysterious Tacit Code"

For decades, scholarship on writing has indicated that academic literacy is too unique and varied across disciplines to generalize writing instruction within a general composition course. For example, as a result of generalized instruction, Lee (2000) suggested that students continue to perceive their writing tasks as putting their ideas into an existing format, regardless of whether that format supports or hinders their ideas. To many, writing instruction in general composition courses appears to be a set of basic skills, or generalizable and assimilative rules, which students are expected to use for all of their academic writing (Sperling, 1996).

According to DePalma and Ringer (2011) and James (2010), many students experience difficulty transferring their generalized writing knowledge from general composition courses to content-area courses. James argued that transfer does occur; however, it is more frequent in some disciplines over others and more frequent with some tasks over others. He concluded, although transfer is possible, it is not inevitable. Consequently, students struggle to discern the seemingly mysterious and tacit writing knowledge necessary for the discourses within the disciplines. Perkins and Salomon (1994) reported on how students quickly discover that their learned tasks do not transfer smoothly to other contexts or to discipline-specific courses (North, 2005). Other scholars argued that, although disciplines share similarities in their academic language and practices, each discipline engages in its own unique practices relative to language, syntax, and conventions (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012; Snow, 1987).

Husain and Waterfield (2006) asserted that as students write within various disciplines, they believe that success lies in complying with an unattainable, mysterious tacit code, rather than in a well-composed piece of writing. Content-area instructors also struggle with how to assign and evaluate writing in a manner specific to the disciplinary knowledge (Fernsten & Reda, 2011).

Student Experiences with Writing Across Disciplines

Scholars have found that disciplinary expectations differ from one context to another. Consequently, students have discovered their writing skills valued in one course may be unwelcomed in another course (Chanock, 2000; Johnson & Watson, 2011; North, 2005; Stockton, 1995).

In a study regarding written work by students, Stockton (1995) found that a literature major, trained in similar interpretation skills as history majors, received good marks in literature but low scores in history. English majors are often trained to avoid writing plot summary, and to instead focus on interpretation of text. However, when these English majors submitted written work in history courses, they avoided writing en plot only to discover that a certain amount of narrative is required to relay historical events before interpreting them.

In addition, Lea and Street (1998) relayed that one student wrote two different papers: one for a history course and one for an anthropology course. The student employed similar writing processes for each paper, yet he received conflicting feedback. He was told his work was acceptable in history and was told his writing was lacking in structure and argument in anthropology.

These studies speak to the confusion students experience about writing, not only as they go from discipline to discipline but also as they go from course to course within one discipline. Much of these student experiences are attributed to how instructors use, define, or value writing, and how they express those views to students. Additional literature suggests that how instructors view writing in their discipline may be implicit for students because instructors, who are experts in their fields, often do not realize that the social, discourse practices within their discipline are unique and invisible to novices (Carter, 2007; Macbeth, 2010).

Role of Explicit Instruction

Some scholars implied that instructors might not provide explicit teaching because they often learn to write in the disciplines through slow observation and apprenticeship, and not through explicit instruction (Carter, 2007; Russell, 1991). Therefore, Russell (1991) proposed, faculty members within the disciplines may still see writing as a universal skill, generalizable to all disciplines.

Richardson (2004) argued that it is important for faculty to take a role in the explicit teaching of writing practice within their disciplines, because otherwise teaching practices can leave unintended impressions and cause students to make incorrect deductions about disciplinary demands. If disciplinary writing beliefs and practices are not made explicit, gaps between instructor expectations and student interpretations of certain tasks and activities will occur (Paxton, 2007).

Because writing is often viewed as a generalizable applicable skill unrelated to content, Russell (1990) implied that many faculty assume they are free from grading and interacting with students, giving them more personal time to attend to research and service duties within their discourse communities. If faculty members do not understand how their disciplinary literacy practices are different from general writing practices, it becomes difficult to explicitly instruct students on how to succeed in specific disciplinary literacy practices. Although faculty may not be explicit on their disciplinary writing advice to students, those students still need guidance.

> It is a matter of learning to participate in some historically situated human activity that requires some kind(s) of writing. It cannot be learned apart from the problems, the habits, the activities – the subject matter – of some group that found the need to write in that way to solve a problem or carry on its activities. (Russell, 1993, p. 194)

Learning disciplinary conventions happens as a result of a contextualized learning environment that a student is within (Bazerman, 1988; Lea & Street, 1998) and as a socioculturally situated practice (Gee, 2001). In this light, writing is an activity with social and cultural origins, meaning that it has to be learned and developed as a cognitive tool (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, for a student to

succeed as a writer in each discipline, he or she must comply with the social and cultural practices of the discipline. In composition theory, research and teaching informed by genre pedagogies (Devitt, 2014) and Writing in Disciplines pedagogies (Thaiss & McLeod, 2014) are creating disciplinary concepts for teaching contextualized writing. Despite the emergence of these pedagogies, many instructors continue to resist the idea that the teaching of any form of writing may fall within their disciplinary duties.

Faculty Resistance to Writing Instructions within the Disciplines

Some studies indicated that faculty have been resistant to the idea of writing instruction falling partially within the duties of the disciplinary instructors due to envisioning themselves as content-specialists and not writing instructors (Brzovic & Franklin, 2008; Fulwiler, 1984; Richardson, 2004). Elton (2010), however, argued that both the specialist in writing and the specialist in the discipline are necessary to help students develop the required writing skills.

To introduce students to disciplinary genres, general composition instructors can familiarize students with formal differences in the writing characteristic of different disciplines, and faculty in the disciplines can continue to develop the writing mastery of students by providing them with explicit teaching of those disciplinary writing nuances, as well as the reasoning and epistemological assumptions of the discipline (Linton, Madigan, & Johnson, 1994). Some composition scholars already have encouraged instructors to introduce students to the kinds of writing expected of them in their advanced coursework within the disciplines (Carter, 2007; Smit, 2004). It is important for disciplinary faculty not to see themselves as writing teachers per se, but to rather find themselves responsible for teaching that the ways of knowing and doing in their disciplines carry over to writing as an essential component to their discipline (Linton, Madigan, & Johnson, 1994). By presenting disciplinary writing in this way,

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> Faculty come to understand that what counts as good writing is writing that meets the expectations of faculty in their disciplines. It's also beneficial that all this takes place on their own turf. It is not the writing professional who is telling them what counts as good writing in their fields. The faculty themselves are the experts. (Carter, 2007, p. 408)

Having faculty members explicitly instruct students on the writing characteristics of the discipline enables students to learn the ways of thinking and communicating within that specific discipline. It further trains them to not only "know" the knowledge of the field but to also "work" in the manner of a disciplinary member.

Encouraging Awareness and Reality Checks

Research has documented writing instruction struggles—challenges for students and instructors alike—and also has placed calls for improved practice. On this note, current practices of genre pedagogies can help inform potential practices for explicit instruction of disciplinary writing. For example, Devitt (2014) argues that instructors within any discipline who want to fully teach the nuances, epistemologies, and practices of writing within that discipline could:

- Collect various samples of appropriate writing from within that discipline;
- Contextualize the models and the assignments so students understand the purpose and the audience for what they are to produce;
- Identify and analyze the different rhetorical structures that are present in the models, along with discussions about why those structures appear as they do; and

- Create opportunities for students to practice those structures, and to move beyond those structures with purpose.

She argued that, "The goal is to learn to write any genre better through tackling it not as a neutral set of required conventions but as meaningful social action" (p. 153). Following these steps can lead students to understand not only how to write specific genres in various disciplines, but it can also help them to understand why certain practices are better suited to communicate in those disciplines, which could, in turn, help with transfer of learning and of tasks. If students understand why a structure works in one discipline, they may be able to see why the same structure might not work in another one.

In addition to explicit genre instruction, instructors can participate in or encourage 'reality checks,' which is a form of auditing recommended by Simpson (1996) that enables instructors and students to determine the requirements and expectations of college courses. Simpson encouraged instructors become involved with content courses to assist students in identifying relevant strategies useful to actual courses. This idea can be used with writing instruction as well: Instructors can gather information from courses to help students become more strategic and informed. Methods for conducing reality checks could include:

- Observe disciplinary courses
- Interview disciplinary instructors
- Gather sample syllabi
- Send out faculty questionnaires
- Have students interview faculty

These reality check methods can be used to enable students and instructors to gain awareness and insight into a variety of academic practices, but most of all, when it comes to writing, these practices provide a method for determining appropriate appraisal of writing demands students are expected to encounter in college. Collecting syllabi, interviewing faculty, and observing content courses provide opportunities to pick up on the unique demands of writing, its uses, and its functions in a variety of courses.

Conclusion

Explicitly teaching a desired genre and/or conducting reality checks, no matter the discipline, can help foster students' awareness of the nuances within the disciplines, as well as their abilities to utilize the various forms and discourses within that discipline. Additionally, the focus on the tactics and techniques of those specific forms will help professors and instructors more completely understand their own writing and their own field. This kind of engagement with discipline-specific language in writing will serve, then, not only the students who work with models and formats of text but also instructors who learn how to articulate traits of the genre in which they work most directly. As awareness grows, so does access to the discipline. As access to the discipline grows, so does the success of those students who learn how to engage in new discourses.

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13-14, 2018 – League for Innovation in the Community College's Learning Summit, "Assessment for Learning: From Data to Action," at the Desert Willow Conference Center, Phoenix, AZ. For more information visit https://www.league.org/ls2018phx

14-16, 2018– Accelerated Learning Program's (ALP) 10th Annual 2018 Conference on Acceleration in Developmental Education (CADE), at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, in Washington, DC. For more information visit http://alp-deved.org/2017/10/cade-2018/

18-19, 2018 – University of California and California State University's 2018 Learning Support Conference, "Learning Support: Building Equity through Assessment, Partnerships, and Inclusion," hosted by Academic Assistance and Tutoring at UC Davis, in Davis, CA. For more information visit http://success.ucdavis.edu/about/aat/2018-conference/index.html

18-20, 2018 – aha! Process, Inc. presents Louisville combined trainer certification – Experience aha! Process Trainer Certification in Minneapolis, MN. For more information visit https://www.ahaprocess.com/combined-trainer-certification/

24-27, 2018 – National College Learning Center Association's (NCLCA) Institute, "Leading Learning Centers, Finding Your Way," at The University of Cincinnati, Kingsgate Marriott, in Cincinnati, OH. For more information visit http://www.nclca.org/institute

28, 2018 – Ohio College Learning Center Association's 2018 Inaugural OCLCA Conference in Kingsgate Marriot at the University of Cincinnati in Cincinnati, OH. For more information visit https://nclca.wildapricot.org/OCLCA2018

July   **14-27, 2018** — Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Adult and Developmental Educators and Learning Skills Specialists at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. For more information see ad, page 19 or visit www.ncde.appstate.edu/kellogg-institute

24-26, 2018 – Ruffalo Noel Levitz National Conference on Student Recruitment, Marketing, and Retention at Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort in Orlando, FL. For more information visit https://www.ruffalonl.com/events/national-conference-on-student-recruitment-marketing-and-retention

September   **30-October 3, 2018** – NACADA's 42nd Annual Conference, "Life Stories: The Art of Academic Advising," at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, AZ. For more information visit http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Events/Annual-Conference.aspx

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