

# A Long Island Study: Teachers' and Professors' Attitudes Toward Writing Instruction - The High School/College Transition

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## Purpose of the Study

In 2018, the Superintendents and College Presidents Partnership (SCPP), a consortium of 15 colleges and universities, charged the Long Island Regional Advisory Council of Higher Education (LIRACHE) Writing Task Force, consisting of secondary and post-secondary ELA educators, with gathering information on the transition between high school and college writing programs to investigate a perceived disconnect among the attitudes of high school and college faculty in terms of what they perceive to be students' proficiency in writing. To fulfill its charge, the Writing Task Force conducted a multi-site, survey type, quantitative study to investigate the attitudes of three groups of faculty in terms of their writing instruction as they prepare their students for success: a) 12th grade high school English teachers, b) first-year college composition instructors, and c) instructors of teacher education.

This study sought to provide recommendations regarding (a) how high school and postsecondary institutions can improve college writing preparation to create a better high school/college level writing transition; and (b) how education professors can help future teachers effectively provide writing instruction.

## Literature Review

Writing is the academic skill most linked to success at the college level (Conley, 2008) and in the workforce (Partnership, 2006). Therefore, preparation for college-level writing is a priority within most high school curricula (Conley 2007). According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2011), writing topped the list of learning outcomes for all students. Yet, a U.S. Department of Education's (DOE) (2006) college and career readiness meta-analysis indicated that "44% of faculty members say college students aren't well-prepared for college-level writing, in contrast to the 90% of high school teachers who think they are prepared" (p. 25). As a result, approximately 40% of all college students are required to take at least one remedial course. Additionally, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (Battelle for Kids, 2019) survey of employers' perspec-

tives of high school graduates' workforce readiness indicated that writing was one of the skills most desired by employers, but over 70% thought that high school graduates were writing deficient.

Contributing to this rift is a disconnect between what English educators read and the professional publications they read. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) publishes separate journals for different English teaching groups, while English writing program administrators rely on a non-NCTE publication from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) (Campbell, 2020). This ongoing specialization among educators, compounded by questionable interrater reliability and philosophical differences between secondary and college-level education, is a significant contributor to students' difficult transition from secondary to college-level writing, exacerbated by the autonomy professors enjoy when assessing student writing.

Also problematic is using standardized assessments such as the SAT writing section to determine student placement in college writing courses. Isaacs and Molloy (2010) determined wide-spread distrust of the SATs to measure writing ability and NCTE (2005) challenged the validity and reliability of the SAT writing section and the optional ACT timed writing test. Despite this research, many institutions continue to utilize these assessment results. Even more problematic, high school students and teachers rely on these assessments as strong predictors of college-level writing competency (Burke, 2019). Colleges may use these exams to understand students; students use these exams to understand college.

Since 2010, the most notable documents to provide guidance for writing teachers and researchers at all levels are the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, a collaborative effort, reviewed by two and four year college and high school faculty, based on peer reviewed literature

and strong methodologies, and endorsed by professional organizations to respond to the CCSS (Campbell, 2020). The Framework (CWAP et al., 2011) describes the rhetorical and 21st century skills as well as the habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success. Teachers are encouraged to "foster these habits of mind" through "writing, reading, and critical analysis" (p. 7) that will develop students' rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, writing processes, knowledge of conventions, and ability to compose in multiple environments. It has been widely accepted by college professors as the definition of good college writing (Chowske, 2013).

Strong writing skills necessitate instructional planning that aims to provide experiences that will lead students to succeed in career, college, and life. Backward Design (BD) is a curriculum design approach that can assist teachers with designing curriculum with writing standards in mind. BD relies on the essential ideas, like the standards, to serve as guiding principles for teaching and learning. The approach requires educators to first identify the end results, decide on the evidence that will demonstrate student learning, and then develop learning experiences that will help students achieve these results. Whereas traditional curriculum planning involves designing lessons before deciding what and how to teach, BD advocates determining the desired results first before planning instruction (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Considerable attention has been directed toward strengthening the transition between 12th grade and college so that first year students will be successful in college writing (Barnett et al., 2013). Teacher training programs have tried to improve future teachers' writing skills, but researchers found that writing instruction in English education programs is often limited to reading methods classes (Myers, Scales, Grisham, Marin, 2016). Thus, there is a need for a renewed emphasis on improving teacher preparation programs that develop prospective teachers' writing skills (Calkins et al., 2012). In addition, there is a lack of confidence among educators regarding writing instruction, indicating the need for greater attention to writing instruction in teacher education programs (Myers et al., 2016).

## Methodology

This multi-site, quantitative, survey-based study examined secondary and post-secondary faculty members' perceptions of their writing instruction to ascertain their teaching practices and how they align with expectations of writing preparedness. It drew expectations from (a) the NYS Next Generation Writing Standards, recently revised to promote the development of lifelong writers, as outlined for secondary faculty; and (b) the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing that describes the writing knowledge, practices, and attitudes that undergraduate students develop in generally required first-year composition courses. Both documents state that teaching writing and learning to write are central to education and a literate citizenry.

Six Long Island districts representing a balance of student mastery levels on the 2019 ELA Regents (CCSS) Exam participated: Two districts had an average student mastery level of 90%; two had an average student mastery level of 60.5%, and two had average student mastery of 41%. The study also included faculty at Long Island public and private two- and four-year colleges and universities, including first year composition instructors and education professors.

Participants completed a short 5-point Likert survey through Google Forms. As survey data can be limiting because they rely on participants' responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), a Molloy College psychometrician examined the questions for usefulness. The survey was administered once in February 2020. Questions 1-16 applied to all participants; questions 17-23 were for education professors only. The 23 questions were used to examine teachers' and professors' attitudes towards students' writing preparedness. Collected demographics determined whether the participants teach in high school or college and, in bands of years, the number of years they have been teaching.

## Data Collection and Analysis

To provide a narrower discussion focus, data analysis will only include statements 1-18 and will not include the section answered only by teacher educators. We collected 87 responses (58 first-year composition instructors; 27 12th grade high school English teachers; 12 instructors of Teacher Education) from a variety of institutions-private, public, high achieving, average achieving, and low-achieving. Gathering evidence from various institutions gave a more accurate representation from this cross section.

The IBM SPSS platform exposed patterns through hypothesis generation. The hypothesis was that the three groups (first-year composition instructors; 12th grade high school English teachers; instructors of Teacher Education) would not be aligned in terms of their writing instruction attitudes and practices and that there would be differences in the responses among the three groups of participants. To facilitate the SPSS analysis and to provide more meaningful findings, we grouped questions based on theme. For example, questions 7 and 8 both focused on writing conventions, so we grouped them together. A statistician assisted one of the lead authors with studying and analyzing data through comparison both of percentages for each response and of means via ANOVA. The analysis searched for a difference of mean responses on the questions by instructors of composition vs. professors of teacher educators vs. high school teachers.

We created charts and bar graphs to represent the data. In addition, some participants provided feedback to the last, open-ended question through which participants could provide narrative responses. We analyzed all data, quantitative and qualitative, for categories and patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). We also ran regressions to determine if there was an influence of independent variables:

(a) type of position, (b) number of years taught, or (c) whether instruction was at a public or private school on the following dependent variables: writing frequently and for meaning, creating research papers, performing research, knowledge of writing conventions, emphasis on the writing process, using standards of writing, use of formative/standardized assessment, and writing to develop cognition.

## Results

ANOVA results indicated significant statistical differences among the three groups in three areas: (a) emphasis on the writing process, (b) emphasis on curricular design/writing standards, and (c) emphasis on writing as a method to develop cognition and to instruct. Regressions indicated that the following dependent variables were affected by the independent variables: (a) type of position, (b) number of years taught, or (c) whether instruction was at a public or private school. The only significant independent variable was type of teacher/instructor.

A level of significance ( $\alpha=.05$ ) was used for emphasis on the writing process ( $p=.013$ ). First-year composition instructors emphasize the writing process significantly more ( $p=.024$ ) than 12th-grade high school English teachers. In terms of using standards of writing, teacher instructors of Teacher Education ( $p=.011$ ) and 12th grade high school English teachers ( $p < .001$ ) emphasize standards of writing education significantly more than first-year composition instructors.

## Discussion

The data indicate a need for better communication among public school teachers and instructors of teacher education. The field needs a common language regarding what constitutes good writing, the varying writing process definitions (NCTE, 2011), and how to institute the writing process into classrooms. These discussions need to include high school English teachers, instructors of English composition, and education professors, as well as content area teachers who include writing in their classrooms. In this way, all stakeholders can be included in a variety of ways. For example, NYS has recently begun an initiative called WriteOn NY through which the State Education Department could include all stakeholders in workshop discussions. In addition, the NYS English and LI Language Arts Councils could hold workshops with teachers in the three groups as leaders of the forum. Individual colleges and universities could institute forums under their PD programs. For example, Molloy College has an advisory committee that could act as a catalyst. Hofstra University and Long Island University have had one-day and multi-day forums that could be used as models for PD programs.

Conversations among faculty may lead to work that will help align expectations among the education sectors which at this point are not consistent and uniform. For example, Campbell (2020) pointed out that the perception of College Ready is different for high school teachers and

college instructors, and what students learned in high school to prepare for standardized tests hinders their progress in college. In fact, it has been argued that state exams and standardized tests do not determine if students are college ready (National Center for Public Policy, 2010). According to Fanetti et al. (2010, as cited in Campbell, 2020), "Secondary teachers feel compelled to teach to the test, and college instructors wish students hadn't learned so well in high school that an essay is five paragraphs and a thesis statement can appear only as the first or last sentence in the first of those five paragraphs" (p. 18).

If the instructors of education are spending more time than the other two groups using the NYS Writing Standards and Understanding by Design (UbD), then why are our English teachers showing a lower emphasis in both these areas? A possibility is that our methods classes may be emphasizing UbD and the standards, but their utilization is not internalized enough by our preservice teachers prior to their student teaching. In addition, since student teachers are working with their cooperating teachers daily and see their professors only once or twice a week, logic indicates that student teachers are more influenced by cooperating teachers than professors of education. We might conclude that the use of standards-based instruction and UbD might also not be emphasized in earlier education classes. Perhaps, professors of education should emphasize both standards-based instruction and UbD in all education classes by modeling both. In addition, if both of these organizing principles are not internalized and expected by cooperating teachers, then those district employees should be educated by the universities and colleges. Perhaps free seminars offered to cooperating teachers would help. These seminars could be offered for free or for in-service credit, benefiting both the preservice teachers, the cooperating teachers, and the staff of public schools that accept student teachers.

Another disparity between what is important in teacher preparation programs and high school classrooms is the use of writing as a teaching tool that promotes critical thinking skills. Professors of teacher education use writing as a tool more than both teachers of college composition and teachers of 12th grade English. This indicates once again that preservice teachers have more of an opportunity to use writing as a teaching tool, while classroom teachers do not. Once again, what is happening in teacher preparation classrooms may not be transferring to the high school classroom. Yet, Shanahan (2019) tells us that "Students who engage in writing about reading usually improve their reading and writing skills" (p. 328).

It seems that a better understanding of the many facets and means of using the writing process, using writing to learn across the disciplines and across both high school and college classrooms, and a deliberate ongoing collaboration between and among institutions of higher learning and secondary schools would contribute to preparing students for college writing.

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