Teaching Graduate Students in the Social Sciences Writing for Publication

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Writing requires reflective thinking that takes time. Yet, our technological society has speeded up the pace of our everyday lived experience. This article describes a systematic method developed by two tenured faculty at geographically distant universities to demystify the process of professional academic writing. Using action research as method, the authors have devised steps to help graduate students begin to slow their hectic pace of life and to critically reflect on the writing process itself as a necessary step in the art of writing for publication. Their method of teaching professional writing for publication has resulted in students' work being successfully published.

The title of Robert Kegan's (1994) book, *In Over our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life,* aptly describes the lives of our part-time working graduate students, as well as many of us struggling to manage our lives in contemporary society. Our students' lives, filled as they are with multiple and disparate activities, leave them with little time to think and reflect. Henson (2005) argued that the pace of life obliges all of us to work faster and faster. He also pointed out that both those who write for publication and those who do not, live with the same obligations and impositions of contemporary life. Yet, the hectic pace of life we all experience means the ability to write clear, focused reports on research often seems beyond our graduate students' abilities, even when they are well along in their graduate coursework. Graduate students learn that writing for publication is a different skill than writing a good course paper. Unfortunately, the transition from writing a course paper to writing a manuscript worthy of submission is often difficult for them to make. The transition occurs when students develop reflective writing skills such as realizing that a good paper is not produced in the first draft, that feedback from others is useful to improving the draft and is not a personal attack, and that their own careful reading of a draft should be done in search of more than just spelling and grammatical errors. Once they begin to make this transition and begin to develop more consciously reflective writing skills, their writing improves in all areas whether preparing a manuscript for publication, writing a course paper, or preparing documents for work.

Our graduate students in Education and the Social Sciences enjoy few opportunities to take courses focused specifically on writing for publication, few opportunities to observe faculty members critiquing a manuscript, or struggling just like students struggle, to write the first sentence on a blank page. The result is that few students pursuing doctoral studies in the areas under discussion ever publish and, when they do, it is likely to be limited only to their dissertations. Many agree that one of the gaps in graduate education includes teaching the process of writing for publication (Jackson, Nelson, Heggins, Baatz, & Schuh, 1999; Rippenberger, 1998). Professional academic writing is frequently assumed to be something graduate students innately know how to do (Gaillet, 1996) or the job of other faculty to teach (Sullivan, 1994). For this reason the authors, who are faculty from geographically distant universities, have designed courses to teach graduate students how to write for publication in the journals of their respective fields, in addition to mastering the content areas of their respective courses.

Although many graduate programs have similar courses in which students are expected to write journal quality papers, the mechanics of teaching scholarly writing have been researched at the graduate level mainly in journals addressing specific disciplines such as Health Care (Dixon, 2001), English, distance learning, and general administration (Witt, 1995). Most of the research on teaching writing is at the undergraduate level (see Blakely, 1997; Jago, 1990; Jobe, 1991; Profozich, 1997; Shafer, 1999), and focuses on a much broader area of academic writing than is our intention. This article is concerned exclusively with the teaching of writing for publication in refereed scholarly conferences and journals. The purpose of this paper is to promote dialogue among graduate faculty in the social sciences, to better understand the problems graduate students have with professional academic style writing, and to begin a search for practical solutions. We begin with a brief description of the method, followed by literature on teaching professional writing, strategies used, implications for graduate education, and insights. We hope the examination of the literature and strategies we have used to teach professional academic writing for publication will promote dialogue among faculty concerning the problems graduate students face in professional

writing, along with dialog about practical solutions to those problems.

Method

The method used to gather data pertinent to this study is best described as action research. Action research is a limited investigation of tactics, strategies, and innovations intended to change a local approach to education or training. Action research is attributed originally to Kurt Lewin who promoted the simple research tactic of changing methods or processes and studying their effects (Merriam & Simpson, 1984). According to Merriam and Simpson, action research is intended to be applied to a specific situation or problem. The research problem emerges out of real events, participants are not sampled, and procedures for the research are planned only vaguely at the beginning and are subject to change. In the case of the current study, the authors have a combined 20 years of testing various strategies to encourage students to produce professional academic writing suitable for submission to refereed journals and refereed academic paper presentations.

Review of Selected Literature on Writing for Publication

In two editorials, Smaby, Crews, and Downing (1998, 1999), editors of *Counselor Education and Supervision,* addressed problems of writing for publication. In the first editorial, they considered the importance of developing the proper attitude for writing for publication and taking responsibility for one's actions. In the second editorial, they examined 180 manuscripts to find moderate to weak correlations between various components of a manuscript and acceptance or rejection. From this meta-analysis, they concluded that introductions, research design, data analysis, and conclusions were the most powerful discriminating elements for acceptance or rejection. The topics themselves appeared unrelated to rejection or acceptance. Henson (1995, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2005b) authored 11 biennial articles for *Phi Delta Kappan,* in which he reviewed various refereed journals in education, using survey research as a method. Henson's surveys are very useful for aspiring authors because, like Cabell's *Publishing Opportunities in Education*, he gives a table in each of these editions of *Phi Delta Kappan* that lists various characteristics of the journals. In a checklist table, he lists whether the journal is refereed, types of articles accepted, percentage of themed issues, rejection rate in percents, manuscript length, and style requirements. Later articles in this series introduced the category of whether the manuscripts can be submitted electronically. Henson

(1997, 2005) is also the author of a book on academic publishing and the *PDK Fastback No. 437* on writing for publication.

Rippenberger (1998) comes closer than Henson to addressing the topic of this article, which is to describe methods we have used to promote professional writing in our respective graduate programs. In addition, Rippenberger (1998) discussed the resultant learning outcomes of requiring students to publish, such as empowerment and motivation. She described the process of walking students through the steps of identifying a topic, choosing a journal, and even suggests using Henson's analyses of journals in education as a helpful tool in choosing a journal.

There are also several useful books dedicated to the process of writing for publication and to providing hints for improving probabilities for acceptance. Of these, the most complete is that of Henson (2005), who targeted professional writing for journals in education. Swales and Feak (2004) focused mainly on writing in English teaching and research journals, whereas MacDonald (1994) broadened out her approach to include both the Humanities and Social Sciences. Gordon (2004) directed her book at librarians and described practical steps in submitting writing to a wide variety of publishing outlets including books.

In our graduate classes, we have used Rankin (2001) and Hiemstra and Brier (1994) for tips on writing, and Merriam and Simpson (2000) for research methods, with some success. Hiemstra and Brier (1994), although using a rather simplified approach to writing for publication, was preferred by a group of students at one university for its down to earth practicality. It literally guides the student through the steps of topic selection, outlining, text development, editing, choosing a journal, drafting an appropriate cover letter, and submission. Hiemstra and Brier focus on the hands-on, what-to-do- next approach, while Rankin (2001) contextualizes her comments around faculty in an academic department and discusses the political issues of promotion and tenure related to research and publication. She also discusses the formation of a faculty writing group as an approach to writing for publication. The advantage of the Hiemstra and Brier (1994) work is that it reads as if it were directed to graduate students, like a set of notes from a course on writing for publication. The one drawback of their book is the chapter on computer applications to writing, which is dated.

Strategies for Teaching Writing for Publication

A common complaint heard from doctoral students is that they have a lack of understanding about how to write for academic outlets such as conferences and journals. As faculty members in graduate schools of

education, we hear frequently from our colleagues that graduate students struggle to write clear, descriptive prose of the quality demanded by professional journals. We feel that an early introduction to the publication process is beneficial because it creates a context for future thinking about scholarly writing, demystifies the process, and improves writing skills. Our experiences teaching professional writing differ. One of us teaches professional writing to doctoral students exclusively and in a course that comes later in the program of studies. The other one starts with masters and doctoral level students in courses early in the students' formation and continues the emphasis on professional writing in all courses. Next, we present our experiences with teaching writing in three different ways using different types of manuscripts as the model (conceptual or empirical manuscript, structured literature review, and conceptual manuscript) in the hopes that what we do will provide other instructors with teaching strategies useful in their courses. In the first section, preparing a conceptual or empirical manuscript, the focus is skill development broken down for grading purposes. The next two sections, conducting a structured literature review, and writing conceptual papers focus more on the process, detailing steps taken within the class sessions and the continuation of the process after the course ends.

Preparing a Conceptual or Empirical Manuscript

In a doctoral seminar on the effects of aging on learning and occupational performance, students are encouraged to move beyond a focus on content alone to include the preparation of a manuscript for submission to a professional journal. Although the content of the course is adult development and learning, the course grade is given on the quality of a proposal (20%), manuscript outline (20%), discussion in class (10%), and final draft with a cover letter (50%).

First, students select a topic of interest to them that relates to adult development as that development affects learning and work performance. Once a topic is selected, the students submit a three-page proposal (by the third class session) outlining the problem, the research questions, the purpose of the study, the intended product, along with potential publication outlets, and an initial bibliography. These proposals are presented in class to students who make suggestions for improvement, which may include a realignment of the problem or purpose. Fellow students critique the problem statement, purpose, and research questions for clarity and logical consistency. These presentations and critiques teach students to accept evaluation from peers and outside reviewers as positive, rather than negative experiences. The presentation of the bibliography section of the

proposal alone brings out many helpful suggestions from class members who might have some familiarity with the topic.

Early in the development of this course, topics had originally been limited to the analysis of extant documents because a student in the early development of the course had submitted a paper that seemed to be based on student hearsay around campus as data, with little or no analysis. Later on, students were allowed to collect data for small pilot projects. Despite this license, introduced late in the history of the course, almost all students continue to limit themselves to the review and analysis of library sources and extant reports of research. As an added attraction, students realize that they can use the course to produce a manuscript that reviews literature specific to their dissertation topics, if they are far along in their doctoral programs. As Rippenberger (1998) insisted, the writing assignment involves all students enrolled in the course, not just those who are the best writers or who are exceptionally talented. The course requirement is to submit a manuscript to an educational journal, but the grade is not assigned on acceptance or non-acceptance, but on the quality of the paper. Unlike Rippenberger (1998) who actually collects the manuscripts and cover letters and sends them off to journals, the assignment of submission to a journal in this seminar is left solely up to the students. Submission of a final draft with a cover letter addressed to a *bono fide* journal completes the course requirements whether or not the student actually sends the manuscript to a journal.

Conducting a Structured Literature Review

Another approach to teaching professional writing is used in an introductory course in adult learning made up of doctoral and master's students. The manuscript required for this course is a structured literature review following a process used by Rocco, Stein, and Lee (2003) where articles selected in structured and systematic searches become the data which will be analyzed to determine trends, issues, or themes.

Students for this course craft a problem statement ending with "the purpose of this study is" before beginning the structured literature review. Merriam and Simpson (2000) give helpful strategies for this stage of writing when they discuss the framing of a research study. Using strategies suggested by these authors, students learn how to craft an acceptable problem statement. Problem statements are focused so that they can be addressed by a systematic search and analysis of the literature. The problem statement concludes with a purpose statement which contains the parameters of the study. Once the parameters are clarified, students select databases, such as ERIC Clearinghouse or PsychINFO, which fit the parameters of their purpose statements.

Students select key words/descriptors related to their purpose statements to search data bases. Students also note the number of abstracts each set of descriptors produces. In class, students discuss the criteria for including or excluding articles from their respective data sets.

Once the students settle on a given purpose statement, they analyze articles in their respective data sets following the content analysis technique proposed by Boyzantis (1998). Each of these steps is written up as method. Students present to the class each step of their research design along with their rationale for each step. Finally, they write up the research design section with the amount of detail a reader would need to replicate the study. Students in this course find the discussion section of their manuscripts the most challenging, in part, because there is limited time to cover each student's presentation of the analysis in the discussion section within a course on adult learning. Another reason for this difficulty is that students have few opportunities to practice analyzing data of any type in other classes, consequently, they lack experience. This experience and context for finding meaning in the data hopefully results in a skill that they take with them and use in their other course work.

An early class session is spent covering the components of the manuscript: introduction (background to the problem, problem statement, and purpose), the conceptual framework or theoretical framework for the paper, method, discussion, and implications. Another class period is spent critiquing as a group each student's introduction section which is projected on to a screen and read aloud. This allows the group to identify lapses in transitions or stylistic errors in addition to following the logic of the introduction. Additional class sessions focus on descriptions of method and the discussion sections of the manuscripts.

In the group discussions mentioned above, students display their varied strengths as critics. Some excel in their grasp of grammar and syntax, or they may have an acute eye for transitions, skills that help every class member improve their respective manuscripts. Involving all students in these class discussions, some of whom are skilled in APA guidelines, grammar, and syntax, seems to build confidence in the other students. As student papers are being critiqued by the group, an uncomfortable situation for most students, the instructor has to play a delicate and important role of moderating the discussion by carefully rewording negative comments into positive opportunities for improvement. This group critique actually helps students overcome their initial discomfort in presenting their work before peers and other more daunting audiences such as journal reviewers. They come to realize that they can benefit from the insights of fellow students, as well as share their own insights, and that the instructor also

learns from this exercise. Students have commented after class that this critique of their manuscripts projected on the screen before their peers is the most valuable activity in the course because they begin to see their own mistakes and the mistakes of others, and learn how to correct them. Moreover, they begin to see that there are multiple ways of reorganizing the narrative or re-conceptualizing a problem statement, rather than the one way they had been struggling with. Students also report that the experience of critiquing in group, although painful at times, is such a powerful learning experience that they never choose to skip it.

Each time this course has been taught, several student authors have submitted their papers to local and regional conferences. However, since submission has never been a requirement in this course, about a fourth of the papers from each class actually reach submission to professional or scholarly conferences and a few of these are published in journals. After the course ends, certain manuscripts may require additional refinement. In the past, the instructor and other class members have assisted student authors after the semester ended. Occasionally, to motivate Master's students to attempt to publish, we have offered students incentives such as a reduction in course assignments if they submitted to local research conferences. In one particular semester, 12 students submitted papers to a local research conference. The reviewers rejected two of the submissions, while one student, who had been accepted, did not follow through and withdrew her paper.

Some students had avoided taking this course until the end of their program of studies because of a fear of writing. However, in debriefing sessions after the course ended, many claim they had a good experience with the emphasis on writing, the opportunity to submit to a conference, and the feedback from the audience. Many of the students were so satisfied with this process that they recommend the course to their peers.

Writing Conceptual Papers

In a course designed to promote writing for publication, without focus on any specific content area, students learn how to write a concept or position paper, book reviews, conference proposals, and papers. The concept or position paper for this course is broken down into three main sections: (a) introduction (background to problem, problem statement, purpose, organizing questions or objectives, and a conceptual/theoretical framework), (b) discussion (organized around themes or categories or headings that guide the argument), and (c) implications (sometimes with tables or diagrams to illustrate the argument or discussion and specific relevance to the field). Each section has a due date and is discussed in class by projecting the given section onto a screen. In this way,

the entire class participates in the critique of each section of the manuscript, making suggestions for improvement and further reading. The instructor often captures these suggestions from the class using the *track changes* function both to project onto the screen for accuracy, and to give the student a record from which to make additional edits.

Another technique we use is to have students pair up or form peer review groups to provide feedback to each other using track changes. This helps develop students' skills as reviewers which, in turn, helps novice authors see their own work through the eyes of a reader. Peer critiquing in a group meeting or in making suggestions using track changes helps to demystify the writing process, eventually lessening the initial fear of displaying one's work to an audience. When peer review involves sending a paper to the entire class, the critiques can be so numerous that they are overwhelming, and even counterproductive. Consequently, emailed critiques seem to work best when students are divided into groups of three or four. This way any given student will only receive feedback from two or three other students at a time. As in any structured group process, the student being critiqued receives the feedback and determines how to respond to it. In this particular course, where writing for publication is the sole objective, students incorporate the comments from their peer group before submitting their work to the instructor.

Grading is postponed until the end of the course on the paper which is just a component of the grade. The purpose of postponing the grading until the very end is to allow the students to use feedback from peers to improve their papers, much in the way professional reviewers would do, had they submitted to academic journals. Grading in the process focused course is not wholly based on the quality of the manuscript. Other factors such as dedication to the process, improvement over the term, and responsiveness to peers are also considered. The process of seeing their own mistakes and those made by their peers allows them to rewrite, edit, and improve their work until they submit their final manuscripts for a course grade. By the end of the term, the students have selected a journal for their manuscript, have prepared the manuscript with an eye towards the journal's requirements, and on the last day we celebrate their hard work and the completion of the papers.

Implications for Graduate Education

The courses in which we focus on writing for publication came at different points in the program. The first course was in the beginning of the program of study at the master's level with only one or two doctoral students enrolled each time. The second course was at the end of the program of study for advanced doctoral students. The third course was open to all in the college with students taking it in the middle of their programs. Regardless of the stage the students were in their program or the level in each course, some students voluntarily followed through by submitting to conferences or journals. One of the authors of this article has had notable success in mentoring students to submit conference papers which resulted in many student articles being published in regional and national proceedings. A few have even been published in refereed journals.

Throughout these courses, we emphasize the need for others to critique work for the purpose of improving it. Each piece from proposal to final draft has its own due date which avoids a last minute rush to produce a final product. Breaking the writing up into parts or sections also slows down the process allowing students to devote more critical attention to thinking things through. As an added learning outcome in our method of teaching professional writing, students learn to review and critique articles, a skill they may need for the future as guest editors or editorial board members of journals in their respective fields.

Some students follow through and have their work published. Others submit and then withdraw papers from the consideration or do not follow through with revisions. At the university located in the rural heartland, a very talented student had her manuscript rejected by a prestigious journal with the opportunity to resubmit with changes. She felt hurt and focused more on the rejection than on the opportunity. Consequently, she did not resubmit. Her project began as an opportunity to review the literature for her dissertation. Her review of the literature developed into a valuable article about age discrimination and the plight of older workers in the United States. The lesson learned in this case is to value the opportunity to resubmit and to control one's feelings of rejection.

In contrast to the above example, a pair of students submitted a paper that was rejected by reviewers for a refereed conference with proceedings because they failed to meet the specifications outlined in the call for proposals. The next year, the same students continued to work on their original topic and submitted it to a refereed regional conference where it won an award for the best student research paper. Finally, they submitted it for publication to the most prestigious journal in their field. The editor's decision was to reject with the opportunity to revise and resubmit the manuscript requiring the authors to reduce the length by 4,000 words. The resubmission was published 2 years later. The lesson in this latter example is for students to control their feelings in dealing with reviewers and to persevere, regardless of setbacks.

It is our contention that students who withdrew their papers did not understand the importance of a strong commitment to present their work to reviewers, to be attentive to critiques, and to the importance of revising their work. What seemed a lack of commitment from students instead highlights the assumption academics make that students understand the protracted process of academic publishing and that, in the majority of cases, manuscripts typically earn a revise-and-resubmit decision. To remedy this, a full explanation of the processes and expectations of submitting manuscripts to journals and conferences has over the years been added to these courses. The relatively low submission and acceptance rates of our student papers is less important than their efforts, as this is the first time any of them have ever submitted writing to an outside jury. At first, our graduate students are intimidated by the prospect of researching and writing for publication. As they move through the course, they begin to gain confidence because we partition the tasks and the tasks are shared in the sense that everyone enters into the process of improving student manuscripts.

Insights

We believe that the contemporary pace of life militates against good academic writing. When we first presented our ideas at a professional conference, the room was packed with young faculty from universities across the United States. This experience led us to believe that the challenge of professional level academic writing is a national issue that all of higher education faces today. We also came away from that conference convinced that steps can be taken to demystify the process of writing for publication. Once structures are designed to partition the process into clearly distinct steps, students can be guided through these steps in a way that slows them down, helps them to be self-critical, and removes the fear of being judged by others. As we continue these courses, we look forward to more creative ideas from students who will view rejection letters as valuable feedback that enables them to improve their work and enhance their chances of publishing. Future research is needed to promote dialogue among graduate faculty in the social sciences, to better understand the problems graduate students have with professional academic style writing, and to begin a search for practical solutions.

Hiemstra and Brier (1984) pointed out all the advantages of publishing, which include contributing to the discourse in one's professional field and even improving one's own ability to communicate and one's own thought processes. Professional writing creates a dialogue between the author and the readers particularly when opportunities are created for collaboration on other projects or when the publication provokes a response which is published in turn. This dialogue expands and supports development of a professional community. Scholars who actively engage in this dialogue are in a better position to encourage students to engage in the dialogue by publishing. For young faculty, of course, it improves their ability to teach in a clear, logical way. Our message to graduate students who hope to have future careers in academe is "keep writing"

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