

What Do Students in WEC Units Say About Writing and Writing Instruction?: Findings from Undergraduate Student Group Interviews

WEC Assessment Update, February 2011



Teaching undergraduate students to write well in all majors has been a recognized priority at the University of Minnesota since 1991. In 2007, the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) project began to pilot a writing program that invites participating units¹ to generate undergraduate Writing Plans. In these plans, departmental faculty groups describe discipline-relevant characteristics of writing and, further, identify writing abilities that graduating seniors should be able to demonstrate upon graduation. Today, 18 academic units, or 23 departments, participate in the WEC program.

Preliminary assessments indicate that significant curricular and instructional changes have already occurred in WEC's pilot units. To deepen our understanding of how students in WEC majors are experiencing the teaching of writing, the WEC project conducted a series of group interviews with upper-division undergraduate majors in several WEC units over the course of the spring and fall semesters of 2010. Open-ended questions were used across disciplines, probing students to reflect on the writing they have been doing in their majors, the experiences they've had with writing instruction, and the impact both might have on future studies or careers.

Methods

The WEC team conducted group interviews² with upper-division undergraduate students about their perceptions and experiences of writing instruction in their majors.³ Two members of the WEC team conducted each interview, with one researcher facilitating the interview and the other recording the proceedings. Student interviewees were recruited using a variety of methods such as listservs, fliers in common areas, and in-person recruitment. For participating in the interviews, students received a \$6 gift certificate redeemable at a local restaurant. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and compared across all participating units. The transcripts were cleaned of participant identifiers, and coded using constant comparative method⁴ so that we were able to identify major themes across disciplines.

Results

The first finding from the interviews is that students experience difficulties in perceiving a connection between the content they are expected to be learning and the writing they are asked to do. While students believe that their writing has improved over the course of their undergraduate experience, many do not attribute this to specific writing instruction or assignments. Rather, they report that they are applying writing skills they developed before attending the University of Minnesota in new contexts while they acquire more content knowledge in coursework. Although writing instruction and increased familiarity with content knowledge may be enhancing these students' ability to write in discipline-appropriate ways, the students we interviewed are not aware that this is so.

The second finding is that while the students we interviewed are generally confident both as writers and as learners, they maintain that more descriptive feedback could benefit them as writers. Some students describe moves they have made to refine their writing skills both inside and outside of their chosen majors, and in doing so, demonstrate a sophisticated and pragmatic understanding of the nuances and logistics involved with studying at a large university. They share theories about class size and instructor experience and the ways these factors affect writing instruction and grading practices. They largely accept different grading and writing expectations from different instructors, and understand the demands put on their instructors' time. However, students wonder how their writing, even their "A" papers, might be further improved, noting that single-draft assignments are less helpful for their development as writers than are those assignments that require them to work through drafts with instructors and peers.

Case in point: Many shades of analysis

In WEC surveys, faculty members note the specific writing abilities they hope to strengthen in their students through writing instruction. To date, the most frequently identified of these is the expectation that student writing demonstrate effective analysis and/or evaluation of ideas, texts, or events. Students are aware of the importance put upon analysis in courses across the disciplines (see Table 1). As one Mechanical Engineering major remarked, "I found that they [the professors] don't really read the other stuff. They just look at the analysis." Thus, for students like this one, the idea of "analysis" is front and center to course success. However, students quickly discover, and cross-curricular studies affirm, that analysis is defined differently across different disciplines.⁵

"Making a connection on paper is amazing. You're just like, 'I connected a couple different things that I didn't know were going on.' It's a lot easier to connect them on paper than just thinking them out if you have some sort of basis for your thoughts. Writing helps to hold them down."

—History major

¹ "Units" refers to departments or colleges.

² Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

³ One to two interviews were conducted in each of the following majors: Design, Housing, and Apparel; Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior; Geography; History; Mechanical Engineering; Nursing; Political Science; and Spanish/ Spanish and Portuguese Studies.

⁴ Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

⁵ Flash, P. "Why, your 'well-developed' looks nothing like ours!: Working toward accurate assessment in the disciplines," (2010 International WAC Conference, Indiana University, Bloomington).

Table 1: Students from various disciplines describe their understanding of written analysis

<p>Apparel Design:</p> <p><i>“What I mean by ‘analytical’ [is to] just open your eyes a little bit wider...[rather] than just looking at [a garment]. You know, it’s about picking out the rights and wrongs and fixing it, so that’s what we write a lot about.”</i></p>	<p>Political Science:</p> <p><i>“[Analysis] is an interpretation as opposed to a repetition of what you just read, so it’s an engagement with the material. It’s not only, ‘What is this?’ but, ‘What are the implications of this?’”</i></p>	<p>Spanish and Portuguese Studies:</p> <p><i>“The criteria that the professors grade on is...your analysis and the level of your critical thinking, whether you’re just summarizing the article—and that’s not a good thing—or whether you’re kind of summarizing the article and then going beyond and adding your own critical thoughts and adding a conclusion to the article.”</i></p>
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Given the disciplinary distinctions pertaining to “analysis,” the students we interviewed note that feedback on their writing is instrumental in the development of their critical analytical skills: across all the majors we studied, students indicated the need for writing assignments that explicitly describe expectations relating to analysis and other priorities determined by the instructor. They emphasize difficulties in interpreting instructors’ expectations without grading rubrics or other criteria provided by the instructor. Thus, student interview responses attest to a strong connection between producing an effective written analysis and instructor’s assignments and feedback.

Discussion

The interviews reveal that while students’ perception of “effective” writing is variously described (attesting to one of the principles of WEC)⁶, interviewees agreed on some specific instructional moves that they would find helpful. Many of the students we interviewed recognize the value of instructor feedback on in-process drafts, and suggest that they would benefit from more multiple-draft assignments. Likewise, students see value in assignments that are made explicitly relevant to course content and that provide descriptive grading criteria. Finally, we find evidence in the interview data that while students say that they are confident as writers, they are unclear about the source of this confidence and are unsure about the value of the writing instruction they are receiving in their undergraduate courses. Their uncertainty raises important questions about both the intentions and the effects of writing instruction. If, as WEC surveys attest, faculty members and students across the disciplines agree that effective writing abilities are an important focus of undergraduate education, why are students unsure how they are learning to write? If students were less unsure, if they were more aware of the moves made by writers, from understanding the specific parameters outlined by assignments to revising and proofreading their drafts, would they benefit? If so, how might faculty members in disparate disciplines help students develop this awareness? These questions, raised by students’ responses to our interview questions, will guide us as we refine the WEC process and continue to partner with faculty members from across the university to improve student writing.

“Constant feedback: that’s the only way that you’ll ever get to be a good writer.” —Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior major

⁶ “Writing can be flexibly defined as an articulation of thinking, an act of choosing among an array of modes or forms, only some of which involve words.” (Writing Enriched Curriculum wec.umn.edu).

Future of WEC Assessment:

Spring and Summer 2011: WEC assessment of student writing
May 11, 2011 : 2nd WEC Symposium, Coffman Union
Spring 2012: Office of Institutional Research administers SERU “wildcard” questions related to writing and writing instruction

For more information on the WEC project
 or to request a brochure, visit
www.wec.umn.edu