

English 280, Third Place; Professor, Dr. Amy Patrick Mossman

## **Merging Perceptions of Reality: Bridging the Gap between Developing Writers and Their Interdisciplinary Mentors**

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### An Overview of Negative Student Attitudes towards Interdisciplinary Writing Courses

Many students believe that required interdisciplinary writing courses are not useful, since they are not directly applicable to their own field of study or their future career. Students may also feel that they are being forced to learn and are only chasing a “good” grade. These negative attitudes toward required interdisciplinary writing courses have been shown in a number of studies, including Bergmann and Zepernick’s study of student perceptions pertaining to the transferability of writing across the disciplines. One of their particular studies showed that “students do not look” for opportunities to use what they have learned in Interdisciplinary Writing Courses (139).

Perhaps this deals with the epistemology that some students have developed about writing. Students have often perceived writing composition as only beneficial to those who will pursue English, journalism, or other writing related fields. They may not consider that having exceptional writing skills might be valuable in their own career.

Despite negative attitudes students may have about writing composition, they can still develop their writing skills if they put forth the necessary effort with proper guidance. Moreover, teachers must be willing to work with students who have negative perceptions about writing. As Lucille McCarthy suggests, teachers must “appreciate just how foreign and difficult their language is for newcomers” (262). In order for writing courses to be effective, the teacher

must realize that students often have a limited perspective upon language. Students must also be willing to challenge their pre-existing perceptions of language and rhetoric to become better writers. By learning to write well with accommodating mentors, students can improve their own strategies for tackling the writing process, their abilities to construct and analyze arguments, and their social skills. These three aspects can then be applied in their own field of study. In essence, a holistic awareness of the value of language can be achieved by learning how to write well.

### Teaching as a Way of Life: Bringing Familiarity to the Process

Many inexperienced writers conceive ideas that can cause them to feel disconnected with their professors and ultimately the writing process. For instance, Russell, who advocates the WAC movement, states that “writing is a complex process integrally related to thinking” (7). It is important to acknowledge that writing is complex, but certainly, student engagement in writing composition does not have to be completely foreign.

In fact, many of the problem-solving techniques that students have developed in their own lives can be applied to writing. For instance, many music composition students may find confidence in their writing if they discover that composing a song is much like writing a research paper. There is a general format to follow, much like a song that has a particular structure. Additionally, there are many elements in music composition, such as themes and motifs, which also resonate in writing composition. Perhaps by teaching students that they have valuable skills that can transfer to writing, they may be able to adapt their own skills in the writing process. These ideas are similar to Mya Poe’s teaching techniques for her students. Poe is a professor

known for alternative teaching methods, and she advocates that, “the human mind is capable of many intelligences...influenced by environmental and cultural experiences” (33).

Poe’s application of Multiple Intelligence Theory, a concept developed by Harvard’s Howard Gardner, is a reflection of her teaching methods. Moreover, Poe teaches her students that the talents and skills they already have can be applied to writing. This is perhaps more effective than teaching a universal formula to writing. Instead of teaching *what* to write, teachers should aim to teach *how* to write.

In essence, when the writing process is described as “intricate,” “involved,” or “complex,” students can often be intimidated. Moreover, students should be encouraged to realize that they can take what they already know and use it to develop their ideas effectively. In other words, they can construct their own strategies when approaching a writing task. Developing their own techniques in tackling writing roadblocks can allow them to develop problem-solving skills for their own career and other issues they may encounter in their own life.

#### The Value of Rhetoric: Applying Knowledge to Arguments in Careers

Rhetoric is often incorporated into many required interdisciplinary writing courses, since it stresses the value of examining arguments. It can be defined as the “art humans use to process all the messages we send and receive” (Roskellya and Jolliffee 2). One misconception students have is that the arguments presented in rhetoric only apply to speeches or essays, genres that are associated with rhetoric. Some students may not see that rhetoric is essential to other genres that may be applicable to their students’ future careers.

In order to teach the value of rhetoric, teachers must first help students deconstruct certain negative connotations of writing and rhetoric. Roskelly and Jolliffee, authors of *Everyday Use:*

*Rhetoric at Work in Reading and Writing*, point out the negative connotations that people associate with rhetoric. Specifically, they state that some people believe that “rhetoric sometimes characterizes a speaker’s lack of sincerity or deliberate falseness to coerce an audience” (3). This particular common interpretation of rhetoric insists that rhetoric is a tool of manipulation and deceit. What if rhetoric were viewed instead as a tool to communicate effectively rather than for deception? Looking at concepts in different ways may be what students need to be encouraged to do. Maybe then, students can see the transferability of rhetoric and writing to other subjects. Furthermore, students should come to realize that our daily lives are surrounded by arguments, and sometimes we make arguments in our lives without even realizing. We often do not recognize them as arguments, because like rhetoric, the word “argument” is associated with negative connotations.

For example, let us try to view a concept that may not necessarily be considered an argument. Take a job interview, for instance. On the surface, a job interview may be just a series of questions a contractor asks in order to see whether or not an applicant is qualified for a particular position. What if we considered the interview as a type of argument? By viewing the interview as an argument, it becomes apparent that when the interviewee states his or her purpose and talks about why he or she is the right person for the job, the beginning of an argument is being formed. Soon one may discover that a job interview may have a structure similar to an argumentative paper. The interviewee’s purpose for applying is the thesis statement. Additionally, the interviewee proves this statement by providing support in his or her responses to questions. Support can come in the form of references or even work experience. Also, the questions that the interviewer asks are similar to the questions readers may ask. The only difference in writing is that one must anticipate these questions in order to have effective responses.

Job interviews are one of many aspects of the workplace that are in several ways arguments. Most careers are filled with implicit arguments, and the mediums these arguments are presented in vary. For scientists, there are scientific articles containing arguments of potential concepts relating to the physical world. For entrepreneurs, advertisements are arguments that try to convince consumers to buy a product. For novelists, the fictitious characters that they create are arguments in themselves. In other words, if a novelist does not have a “good” character, the reader will not be convinced that the fictitious story has meaning and value. The list goes on and on and on.

Yet, what some teachers may fail to realize is that students have not developed such thinking. Particularly, the idea that certain aspects of rhetoric can be applied across specific areas of study may not be apparent to students. If teachers can stress how rhetoric is applicable to writing, and if students can begin to develop their critical thinking skills, then students can begin to see how valuable arguments can be in writing composition, writing analysis, and in their own career.

### Social Elements in the Writing Process

An effective social element to the writing process can aid both students and teachers in the classroom. By establishing working relationships among students and teachers, a merging of perceptions of writing can occur. This can perhaps be achieved by forming a study group. For instance, a case study in North West England examined the benefits of a scholarly writing group. Particularly, M.J. Grant et al. observed that the writing group “enabled new knowledge, confidence, and competence in scholarly writing” (58). Essentially, group members may have gained more familiarity and comfort with writing because of the advice members gave each other.

Additionally, by having a writing group, one becomes more aware of the different ways to write. Even the writing group in North West England felt overall that they had “developed an appreciation of the differences of writing practice across disciplines” (Grant et al. 56).

Observing how others write can be valuable in the sense that we can apply their techniques in order to form our own. These perspectives are valuable, since they can allow developing writers to see writing in different contexts, especially in writing classes where students come from multiple fields of study. Just as Lucille McCarthy, recipient of two James N. Britton Awards for Research in the English Language Arts, stated, “Writing development is in part, context-dependent” (262).

Once teachers and students have common ground upon which to discuss different writing situations, the awareness of context can be established. In order to learn to communicate effectively, both in and out of the medium of writing, one must develop the ability to examine particular situations in context. In writing groups, teachers and students can share their own perceptions of how to tackle these situations. Then the knowledge gained from other’s perspectives can be applied to composing a written work of our own.

#### Final Remarks: What Teachers and Students Can Learn from Each Other

Much of this essay has been focused upon what students can learn from interdisciplinary writing courses. It is important to acknowledge that teachers can also learn a great deal from the students they teach. Again, a prime example of this is embedded in Mya Poe’s writing course. Without her students expressing how they learned to write, Poe may have never observed that people have certain skills that are transferable. This realization allowed her to make adjustments to her course, both to her benefit and the students’ (36). Their perspectives were in a way

merging, since students would communicate their own perceptions of writing and how they are related to the writing process. Poe would then facilitate by giving them exercises to develop their own writing techniques.

Throughout the course of our schooling, career(s), and life, we are faced with challenges that require developing our own epistemologies or ways of thinking. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of writing courses is that students develop original compositions. Even if their work is not up to par, upon review from peers and teachers, student can learn from the feedback they receive. This all goes back to the idea that writing is a social act. Essentially, to improve one's writing skills requires a great deal of learning how to communicate new ideas.

The value in writing is that the writer works to develop novel ideas, even if the ideas are analyzing preexisting ones. This process is not easy in the sense that one must put intangible ideas into tangible media or in writing. One must pull on multiple avenues of knowledge in order to form a successful writing work. That being said, students must recognize that knowledge is transferable, and teachers must encourage their students to develop their own perspectives on how to tackle the writing process and communicate effectively.

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