Academic Writing Genres: General versus Content Based Writing

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This study examined faculty views on academic writing and writing instruction. Data reported in this article came from ten qualitative interviews with business and engineering faculty members. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed inductively and recursively, and two views on academic writing and writing instruction were identified. One view held that academic writing largely involved transferring general writing skills, and writing instruction would be most effectively provided by writing/language teachers. The other view recognized the unique thought and communication processes entailed in academic writing and the role of both content course faculty and writing instructors in academic writing instruction. However, content course faculty and writing instructors each assumed a different set of responsibilities. Implications of the findings for academic writing research and instruction are discussed.

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a steady growth in research on academic writing. One of the most significant findings of this body of research is that “students entering academic disciplines need a specialized literacy that consists of the ability to use discipline-specific rhetorical and linguistic conventions to serve their purposes as writers” (Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1991, p. 19). This body of research highlights a sociocultural dimension of academic literacy and reveals that writing in academic contexts is governed by the communicative purposes
shared, and communicative conventions sanctioned, by members of specific discourse communities (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Geisler, 1994; Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1990). A significant amount of research has focused on academic genres, particularly on generic structure and features. Research findings show that structural and textual features of genres vary both within and across academic disciplines and that such variation embodies different social relationships between the reader and the writer as well as different values and beliefs underlying discursive practices in various discourse communities (Chang & Swales, 1999; Conrad, 1996; Hyland, 1997; Hyland, 1999a; Hyland, 1999b).

In addition to professional genres, academic writing research has also examined the genres or nature of tasks students are expected to perform in university content classrooms (Braine, 1989; Braine, 1995; Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Carson, 2001 and Hale et al., 1996; Horowitz, 1986; West & Byrd, 1982; Zhu, 2004). In one of the first studies on student writing tasks, Horowitz (1986) analyzed 54 writing assignments from one graduate and 28 undergraduate courses taught in 17 departments of an American university. Horowitz identified seven categories of writing tasks expected of students: summary of/reaction to a reading; annotated bibliography; report on a specified participatory experience; connection of theory and data; case study; synthesis of multiple sources; and research project. While Horowitz’s study did not have a particular disciplinary focus, other studies examined written genres required of students in specific disciplines (e.g., Braine, 1989; Braine, 1995; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; West & Byrd 1982; Zhu, 2004). One finding was that much of what students needed to write, particularly in upper division undergraduate and graduate level courses, was specifically tied to their disciplines.

**Literature Review**

Academic writing research that has examined writing in specific disciplinary courses indicates that writing serves different purposes in different courses and requires students to assume different social roles, and that communicative conventions are intricately intertwined with the content for, the aims of, and student roles in writing. More specifically, academic readers approach student writing with different sets of expectations, depending on the goals of writing, the perceived roles of the student writers, and the academic readers’ own disciplinary expertise.
Herrington (1985a) and Herrington (1985b) in two chemical engineering courses, Laboratory and Design, showed that students assumed different social roles in their writing in the two courses and were expected to use different lines of reasoning and provide different types of evidence depending on their roles. Faigley and Hansen’s study (1985) of writing in a psychology course and a sociology course showed different reactions to student writing from readers with different degrees of disciplinary expertise and different aims for writing. Research on academic discourse communities, student tasks/genres, and reader expectations have both provided valuable information for and raised questions about academic writing instruction. An important issue concerns the role of writing instructors and content course professors in helping students develop academic literacy. Based on the findings of their study, Faigley and Hansen (1985), pointed out that “both the professional and liberal arts aims for teaching writing pose major difficulties for a writing teacher from outside the student’s discipline” (p. 141). In the field of English for Academic Purposes, a debate has centered on to what extent EAP writing teachers should socialize students into disciplinary discursive practices and address specific aspects of disciplinary discourse. Spack (1988) argues that,

> English teachers cannot and should not be held responsible for teaching writing in the disciplines. The best we can accomplish is to create programs in which students can learn general inquiry strategies, rhetorical principles, and tasks that can transfer to other course work (pp. 40-41).

Other researchers, however, argue that language teachers should and can play a role in assisting students to acquire academic literacy through integrating authentic academic writing tasks in writing courses (e.g., Braine, 1988 and Johns, 1988). Johns, in particular, argues that “‘general’ academic English, employing artificially constructed topics and materials, is insufficient for students who are exposed daily to the linguistic and cultural demands of authentic university classes” (p. 706). From the discussion above, it is evident that practitioners have differing opinions about EAP, specifically writing skill. The question is whether language practitioner should focus on skill using general English texts or should they use content texts in enhancing writing skill among learners.

Whether some common academic literacy skills are transferable and what the place is of these skills in the EAP writing curriculum have been discussed in publications concerning EAP writing theories
and instructional approaches (e.g., Dudley-Evans, 1995; Johns, 1988 and Johns, 1997). More recently, Hyland (2002) argues that addressing specificity is an essential task of EAP/ESP writing instructors. Hyland (2002) warns against the adoption of an “autonomous” view of literacy, which “misleads learners into believing that they simply have to master a set of rules which can be transferred across fields” (p. 392). Hyland sees teaching specificity as a good starting point.

Much discussion in this debate, thus far, has focused on the role of the language and writing teachers in teaching academic literacy. Yet, given that much academic writing occurs in content courses, and given that the changing demographic profile of the student population in many institutions makes it necessary that responsibility “be extended to all faculties for improving the academic literacy skills of our language minority students” (Snow, 1997, p. 292), it is important to examine faculty views on academic literacy and on faculty role in literacy instruction. Several studies have examined faculty views on academic literacy. For example, Johns (1991) interviewed two experienced political science professors, who identified six factors that they believed contributed to academic “illiteracy”: lack of disciplinary schemata; weakness in identifying the larger purposes of texts; little planning when reading and producing texts; inability to connect concepts with examples or facts; limited disciplinary vocabulary; and “unwillingness” on the part of the students to be objective when approaching texts or topics representing conflicting values or beliefs.

An examination of content course faculty members’ views on academic writing and writing instruction could shed light on some of the beliefs underlying writing practices and instruction in content courses, which in turn could provide useful information for academic literacy instruction in the EAP context.

Methodology

Context and Participants

The data reported here were collected as part of a larger study designed to examine several aspects of writing across disciplines. An essential goal of the study was to understand ESL students’ target academic writing needs by examining the writing demands and instruction available in university content classrooms. This study focused on two groups from
two different clusters in the university context, which are: Faculty of Civil Engineering and Faculty of Business Management. Six business and five engineering faculty members were interviewed. Examining business and engineering faculty’s views on academic writing and writing instruction could contribute to an understanding of various aspects of writing in the content classrooms many ESL students will enter.

**Qualitative Interviews**

“Qualitative interviews” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) were used because the purpose of the study was to understand “people’s more personal, private, and special understandings” (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 4) of academic writing. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used in this study, with an interview guide prepared in advance. Compatible with the central goal of the study, to assess students’ target writing needs, questions in the interview guide focused on the types of writing assignments required of students; faculty perception of student writing skills; faculty role in helping students develop academic writing skills; and the importance of writing. In semi-structured interviews, the order of the questions was not fixed during the interviews, nor was the exact phrasing of the questions. The general, lead questions in the interview guide were asked first and were often followed by more specific questions to elicit further information. For example, the question on faculty perception of student writing skills was followed by more specific questions concerning writing performance by undergraduate versus graduate students and by ESL students. Interviewees were also asked questions pertaining specifically to their disciplines and programs and were asked to share anything that they believed to be relevant to issues of academic writing at the end of the interview. Many interview questions focused on aspects of writing relevant to both native and non-native English speaking students (e.g., faculty views concerning the importance and nature of academic writing and writing instruction). Nevertheless, insights can be gained specifically about ESL students’ target writing needs and about EAP writing instruction from these interviews, although we cannot assume that the needs of native and non-native English speaking students are always identical.
Data Analysis

The tape-recorded interviews were then transcribed. Informal analysis of the interviews started at the transcribing stage where summaries and notes were written about some of the interviews. Procedures utilized to analyze the interview data were compatible with those recommended for analyzing qualitative interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). First, two interviews from business and engineering each were examined and preliminary coding categories developed and defined. The coding categories were then applied to the rest of the transcripts, and brief phrases describing the categories were written beside the interview segments that illustrated the categories. New categories were added as the interview transcripts were coded and were applied to interviews previously coded; several categories were combined. Thus, coding was very much a recursive process. In order to enhance consistency of coding, which contained, among other things, definitions of the categories and decisions made for segments to which more than one category seemed to apply are monitored. Once coding was completed, the coded transcripts were set aside and then reviewed. A few parts were recoded at this point. After this, the coded segments were cut out of the transcripts, with interviewee codes and brief notes referring to the context of the segments. Segments with the same codes were grouped and placed in a folder. Then, the interview segments were compared both within and across categories for similarities and differences and for links among themes identified.

Discussion

Importance of Writing

Both the business faculty and the engineering faculty emphasized the importance of writing. They highlighted the role of writing as an important communication tool for business people and engineers in the real world. The importance of writing for career success in the business world was emphasized by the faculty member of business. The followings are extracted from the samples’ feedback in the interview sessions:

- We demand that students be able to create papers, reports; they have to do this all the time; they do it all the time in business administration, in the real world, and it’s one of the
things you are most highly visible for to the people above you.
(Business 2, p. 5)

b. It is very important ... most of our world is based on requests
for proposals, being able to circulate white papers on ideas
and comments. (Business 1, p. 4)

Comments from the engineering faculty echoed those given by the
business faculty members, again emphasizing how important writing
skills are for career success, particularly in terms of “selling ideas”:

a. In my discipline, writing is very important because engineers
in the work place are considered professional people. Many
engineers are in jobs working either as consultants or high
level professionals within their companies, and they’ll all be
writing reports, formal reports that will be going to clients
or to upper management of their own company. They’ll be
writing business letters and memos, and engineers, unlike a
lot of other professionals, I think are almost always trying
to sell their own ideas. They are not just reporting results of
something that is going on but they design things, collect and
analyze data and try to draw conclusions from it. And so to
me, it [writing] is critical for the engineer to be a success,
not in every job but a large number of engineering jobs.
(Engineering 1, p. 1)

b. Critical. If they want to be successful, written communication
skills, communication skills in general, are critical ... If
they are in any job environment where they interact with
people, clients whatever, communication skills are critical.
(Engineering 2, p. 3)

c. Very important. Actually to find a job later on, more depends
on English actually. (Engineering 6, p. 7)

Interestingly, while writing was perceived to be a critical skill
for professional success in both fields, the emphasis given to it in the
academic curriculum seemed to differ in the two disciplines. This was
reflected in the faculty comments concerning the place of writing in the
business and engineering curricula. Comments from the business faculty
indicated that the importance of writing was recognized at the policy
level, and there were some concerted efforts to integrate writing into
the business curriculum, although the success of policy implementation
may not always be known:
a. We have a faculty wide requirement that all classes are to have evaluated written work in them. I am not promising you that it’s actually done every single time, but that’s the faculty’s policy, and as far as I know, it’s pretty much common for all programmes in business faculty. We actually do require writing and we think people should have it. (Business 2, p. 1)

b. So now what we are trying to do is to integrate that [writing] into all of the courses so faculty are encouraged to assign writing and have students make presentations. Not everybody does it, but at least we are trying to get at it ... (Business 3, p. 7)

Compared to comments from the business faculty, those from the engineering faculty suggested that integration of writing into the engineering curriculum was more limited, as reflected in comments, such as, “I can say that it is a part of many courses but only a small part” (Engineering 1, p. 2). The more limited integration of writing was also indicated in one engineering faculty member’s comment, which from the attention given to writing in the curriculum with the importance of writing in the real world:

a. In school, they [students] don’t see it [writing] as a necessary skill. When they get out to work, they’ll change their mind on that. They’ll tell you it’s an important skill. But when they are in school, they don’t see it as an important skill, and professors don’t present it as an important skill. (Engineering 2, p. 3)

The faculty members accounted for the place of writing in the academic curriculum by referring to the disciplinary culture. Two engineering faculty members made this particularly clear. One said that there was little practice on writing in engineering because of the quantitative nature of the discipline:

a. But we tend to be as a discipline very quantitative. We are more interested in the math, the graphs, the tables, and not so much in the texts. (Engineering 2, p. 1)

Later in the interview, this faculty member related lack of writing practice in engineering to disciplinary culture again:

a. But in the engineering culture, there is very little emphasis on the educational environment on writing skills ... when it
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comes down to practice, very little emphasis. And I don’t think that’s any big secret. (Engineering 2, p. 5)

Another engineering faculty member mentioned student major as a reason for moderating writing assignments, indicating a relationship between the amount of writing practice and the nature of the discipline. He mentioned that he required short essays in his undergraduate classes, and when I asked him how long the essays were, he responded,

a. Maybe 500 words. That’s two pages. Again, remember we are engineers, we are not English majors. So I have to moderate what I ask because not everyone is interested. (Engineering 4, p. 2)

Note that the different disciplines (Engineering versus English) were given as the reason for making the essay relatively short for the engineering students. Comments from the business faculty members, however, indicated that writing skills were considered essential in the business curriculum. In fact, writing skills were considered business skills:

a. We happen to think of it [writing as a business skill. Obviously, it’s a communication skill. Being good at communication is important to business. (Business 2, p. 1)

According to one business faculty member, an emphasis on communication, “both oral and written, characterized Business Information Systems as a unique discipline and separated it from other similar fields (e.g. Computer Sciences). In addition, contrasted assignments required in Computer Sciences with those required in Business Information Systems and showed that assignments in Computer Sciences are more mathematically oriented in which they are more programming oriented” (Business 1, p. 4).

To some extent, the attention accorded to writing in business could be seen as a reflection of the discipline’s desire to respond to the needs and expectations of the business world, particularly the prospective employers, who were perceived to be the “customers” of business programs. During the interviews, two business faculty members mentioned prospective employers’ needs when discussing the place of writing in the business curriculum. Their comments revealed that communication skills, spoken and written, were on the very top of the list of skills prospective employers desire, and this was one reason for emphasizing writing in business course work.
Nature of Academic Writing

The faculty members shared their views on academic writing in the interviews. Their comments indicated two related views concerning the nature of academic writing.

Academic Writing: The Transfer of General Writing Skills to Different Contexts

This view held that success in academic writing largely depended on a set of well-developed general skills which could be transferred to different contexts. The general skills that the faculties mentioned often in the interviews included audience awareness, logical organization, paragraph development (e.g., a paragraph should have one main idea only), clarity, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics. This view, however, acknowledged that students would need to grasp discipline-specific terminology. Responding to the question concerning similarities and differences between writing in the interviewee’s discipline and other disciplines, one business faculty member emphasized the similarities in terms of good organization and clarity:

a. Economics as with other disciplines has its own jargon. Other than that, I don’t think so. I think the goal would be to organize something well and present the results with clarity and with good grammar and punctuation. (Business 3, p. 4)

One engineering faculty member emphasized the common need to consider the audience:

a. You know it’s like anything. Your reader is not going to be that technical. So it has to be a general audience. When you write a journal paper, people reading it are practicing engineers, so you have an obligation to write in a style and manner so that what you did and what you found can be easily understood. Otherwise, it serves no purpose. So I think that is true in any subject. (Engineering 4, p. 6).

The emphasis on general skills was further reflected in the belief that writing skills did not have to be developed in a particular disciplinary context:
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a. I don’t think we need necessarily business examples if we want to learn critical thinking, organization, writing for argumentation, writing for persuasion, writing for agreement. It doesn’t matter what the topic is. I’ll take the topic the professor gives me and work on the skill. (Business 2, p. 10)

Academic Writing: Knowledge of Unique Thought, Communication Processes and Basic/General Writing Skills

This view recognized the uniqueness of writing in diverse disciplinary contexts with respect to thought processes and ways of communication. One engineering member commented on the uniqueness of engineering writing because of the design and experimental processes involved:

a. I think it’s a bit different just because of the nature of our work and the way we traditionally have organized our processes, our design processes, our experimental processes, and so on. I think there is some uniqueness there. I think anybody who tries to teach English writing to engineering students should spend some time looking at engineering reports, published papers, engineering memos, and things like that. I think it would help them target the students better. (Engineering 5, p. 7-8)

A business faculty member described a business writing style that values briefness and simplicity:

b. If you write these huge volumes, like you do in your English class or whatever, you are going to bore your audience to tears and you are not going to be effective ... You have to write in such a way as to gain attention and keep attention, and has to be short, sweet and simple. On the other hand, it has also to lead them by the hand through every aspect of the business. (Business 5, p. 3)

Thus, this view saw that academic writing involved more than the simple transfer of general writing skills and would require writers to have specific knowledge about disciplinary thought and communication processes. However, it considered the general skills as the foundation.
In fact, this view implied a layered model of academic writing, with the disciplinary thought and communication processes built on a foundation laid by well-developed general writing skills. This view, for example, was reflected in comments given by the business faculty member quoted above on business writing style. When asked about how business writing skills could be developed, the faculty member said, “Number 1, you should learn proper English” (Business 5, p. 4). In a similar vein, an engineering professor mentioned three skills that students would need in order to write successfully in engineering: a) the skill to present ideas concisely; b) the skill to use a “somewhat” engaging style; and c) the skill to “condense, summarize technical literature”. The faculty member described the last one as “kind of discipline specific” but believed that “if they [students] can’t do the first two, then they won’t be able to do the third one”. (Engineering 2, p. 3).

Faculty Role: Teaching and Responding to Writing in The Disciplines

The business and engineering faculty interviewed believed that they had a role to play in helping students develop academic writing skills. This belief was expressed in comments, such as, “all lecturers are obligated at all times to try to help students develop writing skills” (Business 2, p. 1). One engineering faculty member, in fact, indicated that content course lecturers would have a more important role to play, given their knowledge of writing in their disciplines:

a. First of all, I would agree that the lecturers in all disciplines have a role to play. I believe that their role is more important than the role of the English lecturers simply because in the discipline we all should have a good understanding of the kinds of writing the students will be expected to do, you know, when they are practicing in their field later on … (Engineering 1, p. 6)

Perhaps, not surprisingly, faculty members interviewed saw their role in teaching academic writing as secondary to teaching content and technical skills. One business faculty member put it this way, “I think it [teaching writing] is secondary to the technical skills for the particular course that they are in, but if you can see how to help them, you should” (Business 2, p. 1). One engineering faculty member shared this view and
said that: “I see my role more as helping them become better designers than writers. So if it is mentioned, it’s tangential. It’s never the main part” (Engineering 4, p. 10).

During the interviews, some faculty members described their role in helping students develop academic writing skills more specifically in terms of providing writing opportunities and feedback. Two faculty members defined their role as providers of opportunities for writing:

a. And so definitely I try to play a critical role in giving them the practice. I don’t know whether I give them enough feedback, but I try to give them the experience of different types. (Engineering 5, p. 7)

b. We would all say we do that [teaching writing]. I would say I doubt we know whether we succeed or not. Our implication is that because you do the task, you get better at it. (Business 2, p. 6)

Faculty comments indicated that the focus was on content and accuracy of information when faculty members provided feedback on student writing although spelling and grammar errors were corrected or identified when necessary. One business faculty member said:

a. I see my role as when I am handed something in, I read it for content first. I don’t read it for grammar or punctuation. Is the person bringing the right facts together to draw the right conclusions to go to the next step in the problem? If I see that, then, I am pleased. I am not going to critique the writing skills of the project. It is where I see the writing or the ESL hindering the person from getting the content that … If I see that, I’ll circle paragraphs, I’ll draw lines of logic flow, saying basically there is a gap in the logic here or your understanding is not clear in this part of the paper. Now once I give it back to them, I sort of leave it up to them as to whether they want to come back and say, “help me do that better”. I would say that not all of them do that. (Business 1, p. 3)

An engineering faculty member said that his chief goal was to help students in the technical area when providing feedback:

a. Actually, I don’t try to improve their writing because I feel their writing is pretty good but their technical problems, for example, if they couldn’t analyze, I try to help to improve … more in the technical area, not in the actual writing of the
Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined business and engineering faculty members’ views on the importance of writing, the nature of academic writing, and faculty roles in teaching and responding to writing in the disciplines. Both the business faculty and the engineering faculty interviewed emphasized the importance of writing as a communication tool in the real world. However, their comments indicated that the emphasis given to writing in the academic curriculum differed in the two disciplines and that the differing place of writing in the curriculum reflected differences in disciplinary cultures. Faculty members expressed two views on academic writing and writing instruction. The first view held that academic writing entailed the transfer of a set of generalizable writing skills across contexts, and as such, its development would be most effectively addressed by the writing/language instructors. This view reflected an “autonomous” view of literacy, a view shared by discipline faculty members in other studies (e.g., Lea & Street, 1999, cited in Hyland, 2002). The faculty who expressed this view, however, did indicate that they had a role to play in helping students develop academic writing ability.

In response to the discussion above, it is recommended that basic/general writing skills be taught to the students and this is the responsibility of the writing/language instructors. This is to ensure the students are given solid foundation in areas, such as, mechanics and the different conventions of writing. Therefore, the transfer of a set of generalizable writing skills across contexts is crucial in order for students to establish mastery of the writing skills for general as well as content purposes.

The second view expressed by the faculty interviewed held that academic writing involved particular disciplinary thought and communication processes, but that basic/general writing skills served as the foundation for the development of discipline-specific processes. The accompanying view of writing instruction held that content and writing instructors ought to be both involved in developing student academic writing skills, but each would play a different role. The writing/language instructors would be charged with the task of teaching basic/general writing skills, and the content course faculty members would assume responsibility for teaching those aspects of writing related to a specific discipline. Interestingly, those comments that academic writing involved unique thought processes and that the unique processes needed to be taught by the faculty in the disciplines came from the engineering
faculty, although not all engineering faculty members shared this view. This suggests that the faculty in a particular discipline does not share a particular view of academic literacy and that it is important to examine the diverse views held by the faculty. Furthermore, faculty comments concerning their role in academic writing instruction indicated that the faculty saw themselves largely as providers of writing opportunities and as providers of content-related feedback on student writing.

Thus, it is highly recommended that there is a clear understanding of roles for both content course faculty members and writing/language instructors when designing the curriculum. This is to allow for maximum writing opportunities for various contexts be exposed to the students in order for them to transfer their general writing skills to content writing tasks. In designing the curriculum, both departments have to take into consideration the roles that need to be clearly defined for both parties involved in providing writing literacy to the students.

It is important to note that faculty comments concerning the nature of academic literacy and faculty role in academic writing instruction indicate the need for teaching specificity in the EAP context. The view that academic writing largely entails the transfer of general writing skills reflects an “individual skill perspective” on literacy (Mckay, 1993), and such a view may prevent content area faculty from effectively teaching disciplinary discourse. This view may also prevent content area faculty from effectively addressing ESL students’ writing difficulties and needs as ESL students’ difficulties with academic writing may be perceived simply in terms of lack of general rhetorical and language skills. A few faculty members expressed a view of academic writing that recognized specific disciplinary thought and communication processes, but even for these faculty members, it is not clear to what extent they were involved in teaching those processes. Thus, the recommendation stated earlier on the roles played by the two parties; content course faculty members and writing/language instructors need to be defined for effective writing outcomes among the students.

In brief, academic writing is highly complex and is influenced by “layers of context”. Successful academic writing instruction depends on a sound understanding of the complexity of writing in university content classrooms, and investigating faculty views on academic writing and writing instruction represents efforts to understand one aspect of the complexity. Future studies could examine how faculty views on academic writing actually influence instructional practices in content classrooms. Future studies could also examine how faculty members
actually comment on student writing and how students perceive and use the feedback. Through continued research, there would be a better understanding of writing in content courses, which should enable language practitioners to better prepare students for academic writing.

References


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