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Sociologists as Writing Instructors: Teaching Students to Think, Teaching an Emerging Skill, or Both?

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Abstract

In this article, we examine common practices and attitudes surrounding writing pedagogy in the sociology classroom based on an analysis of interviews with 19 sociologists at seven institutions in the Northeast. Our discussion is centered on two distinct approaches to writing that faculty identified: writing as cognitive development and writing as skill development. We observe that when they teach writing, sociologists shift their attention back and forth between these two essential features of good writing. Our analysis contextualizes writing as a form of distributed cognition (Salomon 1993), because it is taught and learned across multiple experiences in the academy. In conclusion, we suggest that a greater attentiveness to the underlying cognitive features of writing will broaden opportunities for campus-wide dialogue about writing across the disciplines and enhance our students' ability to transfer and build upon their writing experiences across courses.

Keywords

scholarship of teaching and learning, writing across the curriculum, sociology major

Writing in sociology is an inherent part of the learning process that enables sociologists to observe our students' thinking and intellectual development (Anderson and Holt 1990; Grauerholz and Gibson 2005; McKinney et al. 2004; Roberts 1993; Stokes, Roberts, and Kinney 1982). Over the past several decades, this journal has published scholarship on teaching writing using a wide range of strategies, including: (1) journals (Karcher 1988; Wagenaar 1984), (2) term papers (Kamali 1991), (3) qualitative reports (Stoddart 1991), (4) book reviews (Kalia 1984), (5) essay writing (Denscombe and Robins 1980; Takata 1994), and even (6) creative writing (Gordy and Peary 2005) and teaching students to "tell their own stories" (Riedmann 1991). Despite the pervasive presence of writing in sociology classrooms, however, empirical research reveals that sociology syllabi often fail to emphasize the development of writing skills as a formal learning outcome (Grauerholz and Gibson 2006; Kain 2007). And so for the most part, the value we ascribe to writing is implicit.

The goal of this article is to bring the pedagogy of writing to the fore: to articulate sociologists' conventions and attitudes related to their role as disciplinary writing teachers. The importance of

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writing in sociology requires that as instructors, we be purposive when we assign written work. In short, we cannot simply *require* writing, we must also *teach* it. This analysis is intended to elaborate the "hidden curriculum" around teaching writing and to expose the underlying thinking inherent in our approach to writing pedagogy. What are sociologists' attitudes and beliefs about written work? What linkages do we see between the writing and other forms of content in our courses? Do sociology instructors use writing as a means to demonstrate and assess understanding of disciplinary content, or do we see writing as a form of disciplinary content in and of itself?

The goals that sociologists ascribe to written work are quite varied. We expect that writing assignments will enable our students to: improve critical thinking (Coker and Scarboro 1990; Karcher 1988; Singh and Unnithan 1989), demonstrate creativity (Kalia 1984; Karcher 1988), refine their analytical skills (Reinertsen and Wells 1993), hypothesize about and explain everyday situations within a social context (Kalia 1984), and, of course, improve their ability to write (Bidwell 1995; Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982; Day 1989). Learning "to write in appropriate social science style" (American Sociological Association 2005:62) is an important disciplinary objective. To achieve these goals, our classes utilize both formal and informal writing strategies (Abowitz 1994; Grauerholz 1999; Hylton and Allen 1993; Kalia 1984; Kamali 1991; Karcher 1988; Keller 1982; Moynihan 1989; Powers 1998; Stoddart 1991; Thompson 1994; Wagenaar 1984). Sociology instructors also offer students guidance on the style and forms of writing that are most commonly used in the discipline (Friedman and Steinberg 1989; Johnson et al. 2009; The Sociology Writing Group 2007). While we employ writing extensively in our classes, many sociologists do not fully understand theories of composition that guide our most common pedagogical practices around writing (Anderson and Holt 1990), and so we tend to approach written work as "something else," distinct from other forms of class content.

Compositionists have long described writing as a "mode of learning" (Emig 1977:122), while at the same time emphasizing the importance of the writing "process" as a means to both foster intellectual development and improve the quality of written products (Farris 1987; Flower and Hayes 1981). Research demonstrates that writing deficits can sometimes stem from cognitive deficits (Faigley and Witte 1981) or the failure to embrace writing as a process. Likewise, problems with writing can also arise from the writer's inability to recognize and then replicate disciplinary discourse conventions (Bartholome 1985; McCarthy 1987). Thus, when they write, students must simultaneously navigate comprehension of content, adaptation to disciplinary ways of knowing, and an awareness of the appropriate forms for expressing what they have learned. Both compositionists (e.g., Berlin 1982) and sociologists see writing as a means to *interpret* and *construct* reality rather than simply to describe it. "Writing in the disciplines involves more than just learning genres and discourse conventions. . . . It also involves learning the processes by which experts in the field develop and disseminate knowledge" (McLeod 2012:61).

The roles of faculty who teach writing in introductory composition and disciplinary courses are unique and yet complementary (Linton, Madigan, and Johnson 2012). Composition courses provide an important foundation for writing in the disciplines. Since the development of disciplinary writing skills occurs over the long term, however, it is important for sociologists to be mindful of writing as well. "Explicit teaching of writing by faculty within the disciplines can further ease the task undergraduates face as they move toward mastery" (Linton et al. 2012:169). To become successful writers of sociology, students must learn the disciplinary conventions that contextualize knowledge-making and writing in our field.

In sum, the sociologist's role as "writing instructor" is characterized by a series of interdependencies with faculty in composition and with faculty in other sociology courses where students are learning to write. Because writing instruction is dispersed in this way, writing has sometimes been referred to as a "distributed cognition" (Cronin 2004; Diaz et al. 1999; Flower 1994). Salomon (1993:112) defines the term as follows:

> Unlike cognition and ability, which are traditionally seen to reside solely inside the individual (leading to the inevitable

> disregard for social, situation and cultural contexts), distributed cognitions do not have a single locus inside the individual. Rather, they are "stretched over;" they are "in between" and are jointly composed in a system that comprises an individual, peers, teachers or culturally provided tools.

Proponents of the distributed cognition approach to writing argue that our thinking (and we contend here, our *thinking about teaching writing*) is guided as much by culture, context, and historical factors as it is by invisible processes that occur within the mind (Hutchins 1995; Salomon 1993). And so, to understand fully the ways in which our thoughts about social phenomena such as writing evolve, we must observe "cognition in the wild" (Hutchins 1995:370). For the purpose of our research, this required conversations with sociologists about the ways that they engage in the everyday task of teaching writing.

Sociology students learn to write through a wide range of academic experiences. Writing instruction is governed by sets of norms, values, and expectations that, to a certain extent, prescribe our role as writing teachers. These institutional guidelines define for the sociology professor what writing is, as well as how, why, and when it is taught (Nystrand 2006). And so, in our role as writing instructors we are both socialized by institutional norms that guide writing instruction, while at the same time, we serve as the socializing agents for our students as they learn to "write sociology." In our research, we remain cognizant of the wider context within which sociologists fulfill their role as writing teachers, while we focus our analysis on the attitudes and practices of individual instructors around written work.

METHODS

The data for this study were gathered from sociologists who were, at the time of the interviews, teaching or had recently taught sociology to undergraduates. A snowball sampling process was used. In some cases, colleagues in writing programs on other campuses referred the principal investigator to sociologists at their institutions, while in other cases, faculty in sociology departments were contacted directly. This method yielded a purposive sample of 19 full-time faculty and administrators with varying levels of teaching experience ranging from about 4 to more than 35 years of teaching. Seven of the 19 faculty members are male. One faculty member with extensive teaching experience was working full-time in an administrative role at the time of the interview. In addition, two others were employed full-time to teach in required general core curricular classes, but both also taught classes in sociology as well.

In all, seven institutions are represented in the sample: three private and four public. The universities range in size and scope, from liberal arts institutions enrolling about 5,000 students to state institutions with about 35,000 students. The institutions cover a wide geographic distribution along the East Coast. The courses and class sizes taught by the faculty who participated in this research varied from introductory courses with hundreds of students, to small senior capstone courses with only a few students. Thus, the participants were able to speak about their experiences with writing work across a wide range of settings and classroom types.

The interviews ranged from approximately 60 to 120 minutes. The principal author conducted and recorded all of the interviews and they were professionally transcribed and shared with the co-authors for the purpose of analysis. All 19 interviews were handled in accordance with Human Subjects Committee guidelines, and the identities and names of the participants and their institutions have been kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The interview protocol required participants to reflect on a number of issues related to their use of written work with students. The discussions were intended to address faculty experience in two main areas: (1) the faculty member's general approach to teaching and learning including learning objectives, syllabus construction, and their perception of disciplinary requirements and (2) the faculty member's approach to using student writing, including how writing is defined, why the faculty member assigns written work, the learning goals they most commonly associated with writing, and how students are "taught" (if at all) to write. For the purpose of this article, we focus on the data related to writing instruction that emerged from the latter portion of these interviews.

Each of the authors individually read through the 19 interview transcriptions and began a thematic analysis of the data. We did not begin our analysis with any preconceived ideas regarding the data; as such, we utilized a quasi-grounded theory approach as discussed by Glazer and Strauss (1967), Strauss (1987), and Charmaz (1994) in which we coded our interviews by noticing and reflecting upon common themes that were emerging from our readings. Thus, the three of us coded the interviews separately and then met on three separate occasions to discuss the common themes that appeared in all three of our analyses. This type of triangulation allowed us the ability to notice clearly which themes surfaced most often as we read through the data. In effect, the themes arose organically through the participants' voices.

A quasi-grounded theory approach (Glazer and Strauss 1967) best suited our goals of allowing the dialogue with faculty members to direct the outcome of common ideas rather than entering into the interviews with preconceived notions of what we believed the participants would think about writing and how they would teach it. What emerged from our discussions were two primary themes here that reflect many of the tensions, contradictions, and difficulties faculty experience in conceptualizing the connection between sociology and writing: teaching the cognitive features of writing and teaching written skills.

It is important to note that our data do not suggest that faculty members typically fall into one "camp" or the other—that is, that they tended to focus either on cognition *or* skill when working with students on their writing. Rather, the need to attend simultaneously to both features of writing was evident across participants. It is this interplay of form and content as equivalent features of good writing, and the shifting role of the faculty member that they evoke, that produces tension. Our analysis highlights these dual tasks and their consequences for writing pedagogy.

RESULTS

By locating the participant as the primary knowledge generator, we observed two conflicting frameworks related to writing instruction that sit in contrast to one another as faculty described their approach to teaching writing. Thus, our analysis of the results is centered on these two specific features of writing that were highlighted in the interviews: (1) writing as a form of cognition, a means through which students both demonstrate and develop understanding of disciplinary concepts, and (2) writing as a skill, the ability to articulate one's thinking in a way that is clear and that demonstrates appropriate disciplinary form.

Upon additional exploration of the composition literature, we noted that the ways in which our participants speak about writing is consistent with compositionists' observations of the act of writing. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) describe the process by which writers must constantly shift between the content with which they are working (i.e., domain knowledge) and the form in which they will express and convey it (i.e., rhetorical knowledge). As Geisler (1994) notes, successful writers must shift back and forth between these two problem spaces and allow what they observe in one space to influence their approach in the other.

> . . . [E]xperts develop the abstractions that enable them to go beyond everyday understanding. But it is through the rhetorical problem space that they develop the reasoning structures that enable them to bring those abstractions to bear upon the contexts in which they work. (Geisler 1994:39)

These same shifts described by Geisler (1994) were evident in our data. We found that sociology faculty spoke about and perceived their role as writing teachers in unique ways depending upon which feature of written work—namely, content or form—they were attending to.

Writing as Cognitive Process

Bidwell (1995:401) observes that "sociology is not merely a discipline; it is a form of consciousness." Adopting a sociological perspective is a special "cognitive ability," in which students learn to look at well-known phenomena through a different framework or lens, such as the sociological imagination. Writing is recognized as a cognitive process, integral to one's intellectual development, and so it is not easily detached from the acquisition of knowledge. As Jessie observes, “I can’t separate them [writing and content].” Sociological writing requires a deeper contemplation of invisible systems. Noelle comments, “[Sociological writing] has to touch on certain elements. And those elements, to me, are recognition that there’s a social structure in place, and that social interactions are the building blocks of society.” From this perspective, one must be able to grasp a sociological concept in order to write about it, yet the process of structuring one’s thoughts onto paper also facilitates this comprehension. Jim summarizes this perspective: “If you do know what you are thinking, you will be able to write it. Until you can do that, you don’t know what you’re thinking.”

Writing is the outward expression of one’s personal dialogue concerning a chosen concept. As Applebee (1994:47) observes, “content that does not invoke further conversation is of no interest.” Also, written work is one way to begin a dialogue with students around a topic that captures their interest. As faculty, we inspire students to think critically about various sociological concepts by giving them the freedom to select their own topics of study. Laura is systematic in her approach to this: “I have them find something that they are interested in, select that topic, do some outside research so they find the latest studies on it, or further define . . . their thoughts and beliefs, about it.” Because they begin with topics of interest, often embedded in personal experience, students tend to become more deeply invested in their work. As Noelle describes, “I think about my own writing, the things that sustain me in the midst of many rewrites is the fact that I’m deeply interested in the topic.”

To truly acquire knowledge, one must spend time grappling with the content that has been presented, for “knowledge is not simply a static entity available for retrieval” (Berlin 1982:771). The assignment of written work therefore launches a process of inquiry, demanding a kind of “back and forth” between the reading, the development of ideas, and the writing. Many of the participants who spoke about writing pedagogy emphasized the importance of writing as a tool for contemplation, promoting comprehension, and inspiring the development of original thought. Michael states, “I think there would be a lot less understanding [without writing], because you develop an understanding through the writing. Writing is a form of explanation.”

Writing offers students unique opportunities for learning in that it serves as the means to make a distinctive contribution to the field they are engaged in, and so it moves the learning process beyond the simple recall of facts (Herrington 1981). Sarah comments on the exploratory aspects of writing that “ . . . push [students] to ask the big questions” and in turn form their own conclusions. In this way, students engage in the production, rather than the reproduction of ideas. Bob tells his students “you have to offer insight.” In this regard, writing demands the kind of contemplation that is an essential element of deep learning (Roberts 2008). Timothy’s comment exemplifies this notion: “In some ways I don’t even want to make them learn facts. I want them to think about this stuff, and writing is an extension of that . . . it’s so much more than just memorizing.” When referring to coursework they assign in their classes, several respondents similarly commented on their goal to spark inquiry through writing assignments. Bob states, “I’m trying to get them to reflect on what the point of the writing is.”

Writing pushes students to synthesize sociological concepts through dynamic contemplation (Herrington 1981). Writing about an idea is a way to “fine tune” or to deepen one’s thoughts regarding a concept. Bidwell (1995) observes that writing is integral to the process of learning and discovery. In this regard, Timothy describes writing as “the ultimate discipline of the mind.” For Ann, it is a “critical thinking tool”: one that allows students to experience “. . . an ‘a-ha’ moment.” Ann further observes that “. . . when you write, you are developing your ideas too. It’s not just the writing, it’s the development of ideas. It’s an analytical process in itself, a creative process.”

Educators like Ann, who view the process of writing as a thought-provoking endeavor, often discuss the importance of both reflection and revision in the process. Paul also sees writing as a “reflective thought-related practice.” As Andy sees it, reflection and revision go hand in hand with enhancing one’s understanding as students “. . . wrestle with an idea.” Changes in the written word and changes in thinking are intertwined. Bob describes the transition in his students' thinking in this way: "At the beginning they don't have much inside, but by the end, they really can sort of draw connections."

Students develop their cognitive abilities over time through practice and application (Bidwell 1995). As Paul observes, ". . . one is more likely to know and learn about something if one spends more time thinking about it." Ann notes that this progression of thought is "not something you can rush . . . generally it takes rewriting and it takes time." Essentially, thoughtfully adapting one's ideas is inherent in the act of writing, and both the writing and the thinking require time. Andy exemplifies this notion: "So it's time, in a sense that, well my colleagues need time to read my paper and then comment on it and I need time to think about what it is that they say and integrate their ideas and then revise my paper and that might take a year or months." Because of this need for ongoing reflection, time management is one of the top student-identified problems when it comes to writing. In a generation where "instantaneous gratification" can at times seem like an imperative, it is this cognitive component of writing that can be most challenging to teach.

Teaching cognition through writing is a natural part of the faculty role; however, provoking cognition requires skill. Faculty assume multiple responsibilities when we teach writing in that we are charged with developing interesting assignments, mentoring students with meaningful feedback, and sometimes just stepping out of the way to observe and guide their creativity in the context of disciplinary thought (Sommers and Saltz 2004). Thus, in our role as writing instructors, we are first compelled to favor content over grammar. Laura speaks to this concern in her observation that ". . . we can't be so focused on technique . . . it's the idea . . . as what's most important." Thus, writing is the best tool to evaluate students' cognitive progress and comprehension in a course. Katie notes, "Students have to write for us to assess their knowledge and performance."

Because of the key role of time in writing, written essay exams are sometimes seen as problematic. Paul comments, "I don't think that exams are useful for learning purposes. I'm much more interested in people having the ability to spend some time contemplating and thinking about the issue and producing an informed reaction to the content." Nicolas goes further in stating that essay exams, in his mind, are not writing because ". . . it's an hour and 15 minutes . . . it's very constrained in terms of time. It focuses on your ability to reproduce, to be aware of corpus of thought, to synthesize and summarize or sometimes also answer brief questions, define particular concepts, as well. So it's not a more reflective process in which you could consult a variety of sources or artifacts for your consideration and also sort of have the time to rework, reread, at various stages through the process that I happen to associate with writing samples . . . ."

In addition to restructuring the ways in which written assignments are rendered, the cognitive features of writing also affect the ways in which we assess student performance. Having a limited amount of time to give appropriate feedback to students and teach writing in the classroom was a fairly common concern for the instructors with whom we spoke. Laura notes that her writing pedagogy is sometimes limited ". . . just because of the sheer numbers [of students]." Responding to the cognitive elements of student work requires reflection on the part of faculty as well. Laura states, "When I respond it's more about ideas." One-on-one meetings were frequently noted as the means for offering feedback on ideas. The ability to consult with students as they frame their thinking is paramount for many educators. Timothy explains why:

> . . . [T]he organizing of [the facts] and the learning to think about them, I think I can do that best in a one-to-one . . . a lot of students just need a jumpstart with building confidence in their ideas . . . there are writers in there, but no one has ever taken the time to really grab their hand and help pull them through it without beating them up over word choice and grammar and sentence structure.

And so, when the "writing as thinking" paradigm is paramount, faculty become "cognitive coaches" for their students, helping them create new knowledge and craft their ideas within the context of disciplinary thinking.

Writing as Skill Development

Farris (1987:31) observes that faculty who endeavor to teach writing ultimately occupy a dual role: They simultaneously work as ". . . coaches who initiate students into self-discovery" while at the same time they are the "keepers of literacy and disciplinary conventions who . . . evaluate writing along some standards maintained by the discipline." Thus, sociology faculty who frequently assign writing must attend to both the creativity that is an inherent and important part of the writing process as well as the precision that good written work requires.

Teaching the "craftsmanship of writing," as Nicolas described it, demands an ability to prioritize the long-term goal of teaching students to communicate clearly. As Katie observes: ". . . [D]eveloping their writing skills is one of the things I can help [students] with . . . to prepare for the rest of their lives." And so, when we approach writing pedagogy from the vantage point of writing as a skill, we must broaden our role as teachers. Writing is a remarkably complex task that requires ongoing practice and reinforcement. It can be difficult to dissect content from writing, and so, the superficial features of writing must be embraced as a form of content as well; this is a skill students must master to engage themselves fully in the discipline.

In speaking about writing as a skill, faculty tended to ground their comments in one of two areas: (1) the importance of attending to the superficial attributes of student writing (e.g., grammar and sentence structure) and (2) the need to guide students through a set of preplanned steps or process in the preparation of written work. Both of these features of writing instruction are distinct from concerns about the sociological content the student is striving to master. Attending to writing as a skill requires an instructional focus on the quality of the writing itself.

A number of faculty offered comments about the superficial elements of writing—issues such as grammar, organization, and style—that were problematic. For many of the respondents, these expectations surrounding writing are framed separately from thoughts about the content and course material. As Ann observes, there are students who need ". . . the basics of grammar; who really do not know how to construct a sentence." Teaching grammar embraces a broad range of skills. For example, Jim emphasizes ". . . using active voice, avoiding passive voice," while Jack finds himself commenting on issues such as ". . . [the use of] 'was' versus 'were,' or whatever. . . . Students who don't write well at all can confuse singular and plural and things like that." While composition research suggests that it may be more beneficial to work with weak writers on refining skills of argumentation and thinking (Bean 2011; Hillocks and Smith 1991), many of us find it hard to ignore the importance of good grammar since, as Andy aptly demonstrates, poor quality in form can impede understanding: ". . . [F]or some of the students who aren't strong writers, it was a lot of—okay, I'm not clear about what this sentence means, let's read it together . . . what are you trying to say and how can we say it more clearly."

Faculty sometimes concern themselves with the need to comment on the structural, more organizational elements of student writing. Paul cites his students' tendency to focus for too long on parts of the paper that are less relevant to its overarching purpose: ". . . [O]ne issue that comes up quite often with people who are otherwise good students, is the general structure . . . they focus on the relatively subsidiary issue." As Jack observes, however, the ability to organize is often interrelated to more fundamental writing skills, exhibited at the sentence level. From Jack's point of view, there is a "rhythm to good writing" that is evident in:

> . . . the flow of the language and just the sounds of the nouns and the verbs and make a short sentence and then make a longer sentence to break it up and just a lot of little nuance things like that that makes something interesting to read rather than boring. . . . But it also means, on a more technical level, do you know when to make a paragraph? Do you know not to do a run-on sentence and so on and all those technical kinds of things?

And so, as Jack and others describe it, there is almost an intuitive sense to fixing grammar. While faculty may not use the technical terminology of grammar (e.g., comma splice), they rely on their experience as writers to assist students.

In part, the ability to organize is inherent in the process students use to write. Composition research describes a series of definable steps that faculty believe are crucial in order to produce good writing (Bean 2011; Kamali 1991). These steps—typically defined as pre-writing, outlining, drafting, rewriting, and revision—are seen by most faculty as important prerequisites to producing good written work. And so, while faculty may expect what Jessie pointedly observes, " . . . most of my students . . . they sit down the night before, they give it their best shot, and they throw the paper at the professor," much of their work with students ends up being oriented to extending the writing process. Andy articulates these expectations quite clearly:

> . . . [I]f it's a three week writing . . . assigned at the beginning of the month and I expect it back at the end of the month, then really what you should do is spend almost the entire month or the entire week. But they just do it in the last day or two, regardless of how much lead time you give them. And so some of what you are trying to teach them is what good writing demands and that's to set aside a lot of time.

The tendency of faculty to treat writing as a process is also embedded within the teaching strategies they use. Jessie offers detailed notes to her students, as well as models of what they should be striving for: ". . . [W]e give them substantive comments on each draft. . . . They usually come see me, and often I will show them a copy with the name erased of someone who did a particularly good job, so I give them a model really for how they should be doing it." Kathy engages her classes in a discussion of the writing process: ". . . for at least part of the class once a week. [I'm] checking to see, do they have sources . . . [do] they understand the sorts of sources that they are supposed to get at the college level . . . [do] they understand how to compare multiple viewpoints and looking at drafts." The strategies employed by faculty here are designed to remind students that good writing takes time.

Rewriting is seen by many respondents as a particularly critical step in the development of writing skills. While, as noted earlier, the thinking and understanding of concepts must continue to be deepened through the process of revision, it is also, as Jim observes, about ". . . proofreading and revision." Sometimes, as in Katie's classes, this redrafting process can engage the use of peers: "They were supposed to line-by-line edit somebody else's and then return it and talk about suggestions that they made." In either case, the underlying goal is to achieve clarity through refining grammar and clarifying the language used to articulate one's ideas.

Teaching writing as a "skill" offers unique challenges to sociology instructors. As Bean (2011:86) observes, eliminating error from student writing is "enormously complex." It may be that the inherent complexity of teaching grammar is in large part responsible for the decreased sense of ownership that was evident in these interviews when sociologists spoke about the technical features of writing. For some, the idea of being a "writing teacher" almost comprised a separate identity. Greg describes his work on a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant related to writing across the curriculum in the 1990s as empowering: "I walked away from that thinking I could do this, and I never believed that before. . . . Bill [the NEH instructor] gave us permission to teach writing even though we weren't writing teachers."

As Laura observes, however, some instructors are uncertain about being able to teach writing as a skill, and so they limit their comments to the cognitive features of student work.

> I always feel writing is this kind of—that it had to be this English profession. . . . I always kind of beat myself up about some of the feedback, because I am not a grammar, I'm not an English professor, I'm not a writing instructor.

In part, this sense of inferiority may stem from a lack of academic training in writing techniques: a perceived lack of expertise. As Andy notes, ". . . [L]ike a lot of us, I was never formally trained in how to teach writing and so I don't know how I know how to write. I think it was just a lot of people giving me feedback so I just do the same with them." Kellogg (2006) states that professional writing requires highly specific skills. And so, while sociology faculty use these skills routinely to publish, it is the teaching of writing—in particular, teaching writing skills—that we find particularly daunting.

Research in composition theory suggests that the process of responding to student error in writing is sophisticated and powerful, and it affects our role in ways that may not be immediately observable. According to Anson (2000), our response to errors in student writing is part of our evolving relationship with them. What begins as a more general ideological approach to facilitating the development of writing skills in students can end up being honed by our growing awareness of the specific deficiencies of individual students. By deepening our understanding about the ways in which we respond to student writing, we engage with writing as a skill and we ". . . put intrigue and purpose into an otherwise universally hated and feared domain of learning" (Anson 2000:18). In essence, we come to know our students as individuals when we work through their writing struggles with them in this way.

As Katie observes, teaching writing ". . . means more work and a different lens or hat to add to this teaching bundle." Unfortunately, when sociology faculty assume this added challenge, their students may not reward them for it. Katie perceives, for example, that her work to incorporate a series of shorter written pieces of focused writing was not well received. She states, "[T]hey were extremely frustrated with me, and really felt like that this was a violation of like form ahead of content. . . . It was almost like my reasons [to prepare them for the kinds of writing they would encounter in the workforce] were illegitimate." In addition, faculty expressed concern about the added workload that teaching writing can bring. Several, like Andy, try to limit the frequency of the writing he assigns in order to make it more manageable: ". . . [T]he amount of time that it would take me to read through and do justice to 35 essays three or four times in the semester would prevent me from doing a lot of other things."

Many faculty approach writing instruction through the use of familiar disciplinary forms such as the literature review (Friedman and Steinberg 1989; Johnson et al. 2009; The Sociology Writing Group 2007). As McCarthy (1987:262) notes, it is the job of faculty to ". . . make explicit the interpretive and linguistic conventions in their community" and to frame these conventions as merely "one way to see reality." Templates are often used as the means to convey these writing standards. For example, Michael describes his annotated bibliography assignment indicating that "it is a very useful skill, doing an annotated bibliography, and I give them a model." Similarly, Alan assigns the statistical analysis of a data set that requires a brief report: ". . . [A]nd I give them a template of what it might look like." Embedded in these forms are patterns of thought as well as ways of knowing and creating new knowledge.

In sum, faculty sometimes see pedagogy related to writing technique as outside the realm of their responsibilities and so they use strategies such as the presentation of familiar forms of writing with which they are comfortable. In part, this is due to their inferiority about "teaching grammar," as several faculty here note. However, institutional approaches to writing instruction may also play a role. As a "distributed cognition," the responsibility for teaching writing is divided. And so, in disciplines such as sociology, we tend to use written work primarily to assess understanding, while at the same time fulfilling our role as writing teacher. Composition research reveals that this course serves to constrain our students' approach to writing as well.

> . . . [T]he overriding social context for the students becomes the institutional requirement of the course itself. So writing papers is perceived by students as an activity to earn a grade rather than to communicate to an audience of readers in a given discourse community and papers are commodified into grades. (Beaufort 2007:10)

Thus, in order to fulfill our role as writing teachers, we may need to expand our reach beyond the sociology classroom.

CONCLUSION: WRITING PEDAGOGY AS "SHARED EXPERTISE?"

Our data suggest that sociology faculty simultaneously entertain two competing frameworks when they work with their students on writing. The faculty we interviewed are most comfortable in their role as “cognitive coaches.” When they are focused on the cognitive features of written work, they speak with passion about engaging students in a process of intellectual development that enables their students to play with ideas and, ultimately, to develop new knowledge through a process of research and reflection. By giving early and substantive feedback, faculty provide intellectual guidance that allows students to refine both their thinking and their writing.

Our results also show that faculty also feel compelled to attend to the technical feature of students’ writing. However, they fulfill this role with much less confidence. When the conversation is shifted to the skill-based features of writing, faculty exhibit a tendency to rely on the use of process—they encourage students to re-read, edit, and revise. Interestingly, as faculty move their focus from cognition to technique, they seem to find themselves feeling a bit “decentered.” Perhaps this is due to the fact that while most of us write, we see *teaching writing* as a unique form of expertise; an expertise, as several of our participants observed, not always acquired during graduate training. Most of us have learned to teach writing “on the job,” either through apprenticeships (e.g., work as a Teaching Assistant) or faculty development programs that offer practical strategies for writing pedagogy. In either case, to become proficient writing teachers, we are forced to assume the role of “student.” Two of the more popular faculty workshops offered on our campus are focused on the themes of creating writing assignments and strategies for grading the written work that these assignments produce. When either of these seemingly routine tasks is performed poorly, they can consume even larger amounts of time than the “work” of writing already demands. Obtaining additional expertise in these areas can therefore be critical.

Many of the sociologists we spoke with (and likely faculty in other disciplines) work simultaneously with the cognitive and technical features of student writing: Both are necessary for creating “good writing.” Scholarship in composition affirms that this connection is important (Bean 2011). To teach writing effectively, we must attend to the complex interrelationship between our students’ understanding of: (1) the intellectual material embedded in the writing (i.e., the sociological content), (2) disciplinary conventions (i.e., the sociological context), and (3) basic principles of grammar. In fact, as the cognitive complexity inherent in writing task increases, there is quite often a decline in grammar. A student who is struggling to understand complex sociological concepts is also likely to have difficulty writing about them, even when the student is a proficient writer. Fortunately, while we as sociologists feel less able to offer help with the technical features of writing, this area is also where composition research demonstrates that our intervention is least likely to have an impact (Bean 2011; Hillocks and Smith 1991). Bean (2011:84) favors holding students responsible for correcting their own grammatical errors: “In not marking errors, the instructor hopes to create an environment that forces students to develop their own mental procedures for finding and correcting errors.” No doubt, many of us have spent a good deal of time and energy line editing a student’s paper, only to watch the student flip to the back page, read the grade, and ignore our other comments. Perhaps they are equally aware that grammar skills are acquired by *making* corrections, not reading them.

While it is important that our classroom policies and personal practices around teaching writing acknowledge the link between the cognitive and technical features of writing, our ability to train our students to become writers of sociology is affected as much by these interpersonal experiences, as it is by departmental practice, disciplinary conventions, and campus programs related to writing. As such:

> . . . [W]e must recognize that discourse is inseparable from institutions, from organizational structures, from disciplinary and professional knowledge claims and interests, and from the day-to-day interaction of workers. Because discourse is related recursively to social practice and institutions—each shaping the other—we have to face the fact that in teaching discourse we are unavoidably engaged in the production of professional and cultural power. (Herndl 1993:353-54)

And so, while we can frame the dialogue around writing in our classrooms—and perhaps in our departments—with purpose, sociologists must also consider taking a more active role in campus discussions on writing as a learning outcome. There is much to be learned from disciplines like ours, where written work constitutes a major part of what we do. As Fulweiler (2012:108) aptly remarks, "There is a wealth of knowledge about writing in the pool of teachers who do not teach writing or who think they do not know how to teach writing." Sociological research on curricular development has demonstrated the importance of engaging multiple players—students, faculty, institutions, and even community employers in conversations about learning outcomes (Macheski and Lowney 2002).

One theory about emerging writers—novice/expert theory—contends that students fail at writing because of the lack of coordinated effort on the part of writing teachers (both across and within disciplines) to sensitize them to the kinds of writing that are valued in the academy (Bean 2011). Novice/expert theory implies that with coordinated coaching from the many writing teachers they encounter, students' writing skills will improve rapidly. Accepting that writing is a "distributed cognition," as we have previously argued, sociologists must be prepared to engage in interdisciplinary dialogues about writing pedagogy as a necessary part of teaching writing. Our effectiveness as writing instructors is dependent on our willingness to forge linkages with other faculty who teach writing—both in our departments and beyond—for the purpose of creating mutual understandings about how our students progress through the curriculum in their development as thinkers and writers. Faculty development initiatives, such as the one on our campus, that treat writing in the disciplines as a form of "shared expertise" between disciplinary and composition faculty (Smart, Hudd, and Delohery 2012) play a critical role in facilitating these conversations.

Our research suggests that sociology faculty naturally engage in conversations around the cognitive features of writing. We contend here that it is these underlying thinking tasks, embedded in the process of writing, that constitute a more effective place to begin institutional discussions about writing. On the surface, it may seem "the business" of writing pedagogy is about modeling forms, such as the literature review. However, the cognitive tasks beneath these disciplinary conventions (e.g., the ability to analyze data) will provide us with a much richer foundation for multidisciplinary experiences with writing pedagogy. By encouraging our students and colleagues to frame the conversation about writing around these broader underlying relationships (see Table 1), the distributed nature of writing cognition provides us with opportunities to create linkages across disciplines. Likewise, when we treat writing as a form of distributed cognition, it enables us to see possibilities for scaffolding students' experiences with writing across time and multiple courses (Hutchins 1995). In sum, we reduce the complexities that are inherent in the process of learning to write.

> Cognitive skills are general tools in much the same way the human hand is. Your hands alone are not enough; you need objects to grasp. Moreover, as you reach for an object, whether a pen or a ball, you shape your hand

Table 1. Shifting the Emphasis in Sociological Writing

"Old" Paradigm	"New" Paradigm
Writing used to **demonstrate** disciplinary knowledge	Writing used to **create** disciplinary knowledge
Quality of **writing**	Quality of **knowledge created** through written work
Writing as a **skill** to be developed	Writing as a **process** for generating thought and clarifying thinking
Writing learned in **introductory composition**: a "once and for all" approach	Writing learned **throughout college**: a trajectory approach
Emphasis on **disciplinary forms and conventions** of written work	Emphasis on **cognitive functions** of written work

> to assure a good grip. And you need to learn to handle different objects appropriately—you don't pick up a baby the same way you pick up a basket of laundry. Likewise, general cognitive skills can be thought of as general gripping devices for retrieving and wielding domain-specific knowledge. (Perkins and Salomon 1989:23)

By teaching our students to "adjust their grip," we help them to navigate both the changes in thinking and changes in form that will enable them to contribute effectively to disciplinary knowledge. And in the process, we will find a more meaningful place for the writing we assign in our classes, facilitate student learning, and develop a deeper understanding of our role as writing teachers.

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