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Sylvia Read
Utah State University, sylvia.read@usu.edu

Melanie M. Landon-Hays
Western Oregon University, haysmelanie@gmail.com

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The Knowing/Doing Gap: Challenges of Effective Writing Instruction in High School

Sylvia Read, Utah State University
Melanie Landon-Hays, Western Oregon University

In high school classrooms, across content areas, students are required to write, often as an assessment of a student's comprehension of subject matter, to gain insight into a student's thinking, or as a way for students to demonstrate higher order thinking skills. Many writing initiatives, such as process writing, traits-based writing, and writing across the curriculum have been advocated as a way to improve student writing. Despite this emphasis on the teaching of writing in secondary education, many reports claim that high school writing is in need of improvement. In 2003, Persky et al. rated 70% of students in grades 4-12 as low-achieving writers and other studies argue that nearly one third of high school graduates are not ready for college-level composition courses, with numbers being higher from certain groups (Graham & Perin, 2007). Additionally, several reports have drawn attention to this adolescent literacy crisis (e.g., American Diploma Project 2004; Biancarosa, & Snow 2004; Kamil, 2003).

The proliferation of large-scale writing assessments as an indicator of grade level literacy proficiency signals the importance of writing in the school curriculum. Writing is important not only as a skill for future success, but also as a measure of student learning as a requirement for school advancement. Graham and Perin (2007) state, "Most contexts of life (school, the workplace, and the community) call for some level of writing skill, and each context makes overlapping, but not identical demands" (9). However, though writing is an outgrowth of communication processes, its productive demands make it a difficult skill for students to grasp (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Hidi & Buscolo, 2006). Similarly, writing is difficult for teachers to teach and assess (Huot, 2002). Therefore, it is important that students have access to instruction and assessment that better prepares them to be writers (Graham & Perin, 2007; McCarthey, 2008). Despite emphasis on the importance of teaching and assessing writing, Kiuhara, Graham and Hawken (2009) found that secondary teachers across content areas often feel that they are poorly prepared to teach and assess writing.

Review of the Literature

The literature provides a wealth of information concerning writing instruction and assessment. The bulk of studies discussing writing assessment have evolved from two primary historical orientations: educational psychology and composition studies (Coker & Lewis, 2008). Studies stemming from educational psychology are rooted in psychometrics and have an emphasis in positivist epistemologies and research that use writing assessment as a means of identifying human intelligence (Huot, 2002). Because high stakes writing assessment is largely disconnected from the actual process of writing, some researchers argue that these types of assessment provide faulty measures of proficiency and inaccurate gate keeping (Huot, 2002; McCarthey, 2008). Additionally, the studies in educational psychology focus on essay exams that occur in a timed setting in an isolated context. As a result, teachers and researchers of composition/writing in the classroom setting have advocated a different approach to assessment (Coker & Lewis, 2008; McCarthey, 2008; Murphy & Yancey, 2008; Newell, 2006).

Composition research, on the other hand, describes the disconnect between high-stakes summative writing assessments and the teaching of writing (Beck & Jeffery, 2007, McCarthey, 2008; Scott, 2008; Hillocks, 2008; Murphy & Yancey, 2008). Composition researchers argue that the isolated nature of high-stakes summative writing assessment does not mirror the way that writers write. They agree that writing is a deeply contextual act that requires numerous and varied skills applied to differing situations and considerations of audience (Graham & Perin, 2007; McCarthey, 2008; Newell, 2006; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Shanahan, 2006; Tolchinsky, 2006). Studies in this field advocate formative assessment that more closely mirrors the writing process.

Due to the conflicting foundations of both fields, the discrepancy between what is tested and what is taught has grown. This fact, coupled with the research suggesting that teachers feel ill prepared to teach writing, has fueled a movement to provide writing assessment that more closely resembles the writing process (Beck & Jeffery, 2007; Coker & Lewis, 2008; Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009; McCarthey, 2008; Nagin, 2003). Studies argue that high-stakes summative assessments of writing are not sensitive to learner needs and punish them for skills students may not be acquiring because the assessment context does not match the context in which students usually write (Huot, 2002; McCarthey, 2008; Scott, 2008). Concurrently, research in assessment and its effects on student learning advocates the use of formative assessment over summative assessment to improve student skill acquisition and learning (Black & William, 1998; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Marzano, 2006).

Notwithstanding the research advocating formative assessments and its connection to the writing process, most writing assessment remains summative. Studies have found that students are not regularly given opportunities to write and be assessed in the context of classroom instruction (Beck & Jeffery, 2007; Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007). Research agrees that secondary school students need many differing exposures to a variety of forms of writing (Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 2008). Students also need numerous opportunities to write and receive feedback on their writing in order to improve (Acker & Halasek, 2008; Hillocks, 2008). Given many teachers' uneasiness about their preparation to teach and assess writing, it is not surprising that students tend to receive fewer opportunities to improve their writing through frequent practice and assessment (Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Situated cognition theory (Wilson, 2002; Greeno, 1998; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) is useful in describing how writing instruction and assessment that is sensitive to the differing demands of the act of writing can be beneficial in improving student ability to write. Situated cognition takes into consideration the cultural background, societal context, and individual situations that permeate learning (D'Andrade, 1981). This theory is grounded in the belief that learning is recursive, situated in authentic learning environments that are as dynamic and evolving as the act of learning itself (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

This theory acknowledges the dynamic nature of learning and points toward a view of learning in which "cognitive activity is distributed across individuals and situations" (Robbins & Aydede, 2009). Situated cognition theory provides a framework for considering writing instruction that is sensitive to the time, purposes, and needs of individual learners. It also recognizes that learners and teachers will have a different relationship than a traditional, transmission of knowledge-centered classroom. In this context, teachers are not dispensers of knowledge but are facilitators. This notion is pedagogically useful in that it describes the contextual nature of writing and promotes the idea that writing is a skill that cannot just be "acquired" but is in need of instruction that emphasizes the side-by-side learning, repeated practice, modeling and scaffolding in instruction that looks more like apprenticing (Lave, 1997; Rogoff, 1991).

Traditional instructional theories enacted in the classroom produce narrow writing tasks that do not consider the context, purpose, or intended audience of the writing and will ultimately limit a student's ability to assess and improve their writing. Wolsey (2010) argues, "If students are to become proficient writers about and across many content areas, they must attend to multiple jobs, often simultaneously, and give priority to some jobs depending on the variables of the task throughout the process" (195). Because of these conditions,

writing cannot be taught once at the beginning of an assignment and assessed once at the end. Rather, both the teaching and assessing of writing must take into account the context in which students are writing. Theorizing effective writing instruction and assessment through the lens of situated cognition theory is valuable because it is not possible to teach writers as apprentices in a classroom dominated by traditional models of teaching and assessment.

Anchoring the literature discussed above in the theoretical framework of situated cognition, the goal of this study is to explore the perceptions of five new high school English teachers regarding their own experiences learning to write as students, their preparation to become teachers of writing, and how they teach and assess writing in their classrooms.

Study Setting

Valley High School is situated in a moderately sized University town in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States that until recently has had a fairly homogenous population. This population has been characteristically White, subscribing to one religion, and with very little poverty. Valley High School (VHS) is the single high school in a small school district and is making changes from a traditional, departmentally governed mini-college mentality to a collaborative culture focusing on literacy and on meeting student needs. One of the main areas of focus in VHS's attempts at improving literacy is to focus on giving more opportunities to students in writing and to align assessments of writing with state assessments. In the past, these state assessments of writing have been given at the end of the year. They are timed and generally focus on persuasive writing skills. The primary preparation for these tests has been in the form of five-paragraph essays written to past prompts. At the time of data collection, the tests were graded by human graders at the state office in the summer and the scores were made available to teachers the next year. Teachers often complained that assessment data was available to them too late and, as a result, had no effect on their instruction because their students had moved on. Because these teachers were still forming their ideas about writing instruction and assessment, we believed their "newness" could be beneficial because this research study would provide ample opportunities to learn how these teachers perceived their own learning of writing, their preparation to teach writing, and the ways in which they taught and assessed writing in their classrooms.

In order to more fully understand English teachers' views of writing instruction, we interviewed five high school English teachers using semi-structured interviewing techniques (Glesne, 2010). These teachers signed informed consent letters and expressed the desire to volunteer for the study because it would give them an opportunity to reflect on their instruction. We did not choose the teachers based on gender or age, though all were within the beginning years of their teaching careers. In addition, we conducted classroom observations of each teacher's class. Specifically, Melanie attended each class on a day requested by the teacher to observe their writing instruction. During these observations, Melanie recorded details of the classroom environment, including but not limited to the following: teacher interactions with students, teacher lesson preparation, student reception of teaching, and specific references to writing instruction and assessment. We coded the transcripts of the interviews and classroom observations looking for indicators of what teachers know about writing instruction, what kind of writing instruction occurs in their classrooms, and environmental issues in their 'situations' that contribute to their knowledge and practice of writing instruction. Initial coding centered around statements of 1) knowledge about writing instruction, 2) writing instructional practices, and 3) situational factors at work during writing instruction. The second level of coding was inductive, producing sub codes to categorize themes that we present in the findings section (Glesne, 2010).

The findings are organized into two strands: teacher beliefs about their own formative opportunities with writing, both as students and in preparation to become teachers, and teacher reflections on best practices in writing instruction and assessment and how they often contradict the reality of writing instruction in a high school classroom.

Teacher Perspectives

Much of the research literature suggests that writing instruction in the past has not prepared secondary students for the rigors of college writing because it is not "informed by what is known about the factors that foster writing development and proven methods for promoting such development" (MacArthur, Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006). The teachers in this study did not feel that their own K-12 education provided good writing instruction.

Teachers have not had good models in writing instruction. In all five interviews, it was apparent that the teachers felt that in their own high school education, writing was evaluated in a highly subjective manner by their teachers, was assigned rather than taught, and was not aligned with what they had since learned about best practices in writing instruction. All teachers mentioned feeling "unschooled" in writing and getting by in their classes because they had some "natural" ability. From Cade's words that, "if you could figure out what the teacher wanted, you'd be fine" to Phillip's, "I don't remember too much writing instruction in high school," interviewees confirmed this idea. No teacher remembered feeling that they had received instruction that treated them like someone who was learning to write. They reported that much of what they did was guess how to fulfill the writing assignment; later, they received a summative evaluation that offered no opportunity for revision.

This type of teaching is in line with the traditional transmission model of teaching. Further comments from the interviews indicated that this kind of teaching was the norm in the high school writing instruction that the interviewees received. Martin stated, "I think it was generic...I don't remember revising or peer editing at all. I don't remember learning the writing process…it was kind of like we'll go through this once and then we'll move on…." Nadia summarized that the writing instruction and assessment she received "depended on the teacher…I would say that it was completely subjective." There was no side-by-side learning, modeling, or scaffolding (Rogoff, 1991).

Methods for teaching writing in teacher preparations programs. The remembered experience of these teachers is additional evidence that the preparation of high school English teachers for the task of teaching and assessing writing is lacking (Coker & Lewis, 2008). Much research on effective writing instruction and assessment advocates the use of good modeling, both of processes and expectations (Graham & Perin, 2007; Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009). In addition to feeling as though they had not experienced good writing instruction when they were in high school, all five teachers interviewed claimed that their teacher preparation programs had a low emphasis on writing instruction and assessment. Martin recalled, "I don't remember in college a class that was specific to learning how to teach writing, I mean we got little bits and pieces." Phillip remembered learning solid writing theory in his classes, but found "it's hard to look at the theory and put it into practice because I hadn't seen any of the 'effective teaching' when I was a student."

These teachers also agreed that what they learned worked for the context of the college methods course, but they found it hard to put this into place in their own classrooms because the context was so different. Nadia took her teaching writing class during her second year of college and would not have an opportunity to be in the classroom for two more years. The students were expected to complete writing assignments, and according to Nadia, "Even now as a teacher I look back to the portfolio I created in the class and it was kind of ridiculous and it didn't have any real application in the classroom." Similarly, Cade found, "as far as writing, we would usually have one or two lesson plans that were the culmination of our class and we would write up some sort of an assessment for each lesson and it always ended up being really contrived"—clearly not the authentic learning environment that might foster a sensitivity to the differing demands of writing tasks.

Reflections on the reality of classroom writing instruction. Writing is a complex phenomenon that requires carrying out procedures to generate text, but also requires developing schemata for understanding the context of writing, tapping background knowledge, creating emotional dispositions and attitudes toward writing, along with micro-level skills and macro-level understandings (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Writing is a complex act that varies according to situation, audience, and purpose. For this reason, writing is different across disciplines, both in its learning and its assessment. It is perhaps no wonder that teachers do not often assign activities that involve writing multiple paragraphs (Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009).

The time it takes to teach and assess writing effectively. Effective writing instruction and assessment that improves student ability to write takes time to model through teacher demonstration and example papers, provision of detailed and relevant feedback, and chances for multiple revisions that are specific to individual writers (Graham & Perin, 2007). Nadia stated:

> My philosophy is that writing is a process and that students don't understand that. They think it's a pull it out in one night and it's done and it's great. Whereas, I'm really trying to help them understand that writing is a process and you should never be done completely.

This "process writing" philosophy requires that students write with a consciousness that writing should be revised based on feedback from teachers and peers. It is difficult to support students as writers using a whole class traditional model where teachers give an assignment, provide limited feedback and instruct using whole class fix-ups. All teachers concurred when asked what they felt effective writing instruction would be like in a classroom. Cade said, "Ideally, it would be taking the time with each individual student to go over what they are doing and what is working."

Typical workloads for high school English teachers include teaching multiple class periods each day with no less than 32 students per class and sometimes as many as 42. Teachers teach five classes a day, instructing more than 150 students each day, even though the recommended load of secondary English teachers is no more than 100 students per day (NCTE ¶1). When asked to quantify the time they spent grading papers, all five teachers gave responses that fit within a five to ten hour per week range. This was time spent in addition to their regular teaching load and is outside of paid contract time. All teachers felt that these time constraints were prohibitive to the effective teaching and assessment of writing, especially when teachers desire to teach using an apprenticeship model. Phillip commented:

> As you can imagine, to read one paper and give it the type of attention that you would need, it would probably take 20 minutes… and you multiply that by 60 students, and it's increasing next year to 30-40 students per class and count that as 80 students for two classes. It's going to be 20 to 30 hours of work outside of your real contract time because all you have is 6 hours a week during your contract time…if you were going to spend the amount of time that each paper needed for your students to make drastic improvements in writing it is just unconscionable, it is infeasible, it is impossible to do this and lead a life and be happy.

Nadia concurred with the difficulty of the time requirements to enact effective writing instruction and assessment. It was obvious during the interviews that the teachers were frustrated with the time constraints that their teaching contract imposed on their time to grade and provide effective instruction and assessment in writing. Additionally, they felt that by the time they did get feedback to students, the students had forgotten the assignment and the feedback didn't help them to improve anyway. Unfortunately, observations of these teachers during the time when they took their students to the writing lab revealed that they did not make use of the time they *did* have with students to give one-on-one attention and feedback. Several classes can work in the writing lab simultaneously, and rather than confer with students while they wrote, the teachers tended to talk to each other.

The teachers also felt constrained by time when assigning writing. All teachers felt that they were unable

to teach and assign writing assignments as often as they liked. Phillip recounts, "In my experience I've become a better writer through writing more." However, he felt like the more writing he assigns, the more he has to grade and he doesn't have the time to do that. He continues, "If I know I have to grade those stacks of papers, I think why assign it if I have to grade it? I hate it. It's my least favorite part of the job, that toiling over each paper." Similarly, Martin expressed his dissatisfaction with the time it takes to assign and assess writing. He states, "If I'm behind on their current writing assignment that they've turned in and I still need to get to that I'll prolong or postpone the next one a couple of days." These teachers found that they were not able to provide their students with enough time or opportunities to write because of the burden of responding to so many students.

Above we asserted that it takes time to model through teacher demonstration and example papers. Our observations revealed that Nadia and Phillip were able to incorporate these elements. Specifically, Nadia read aloud her own personal essay and asked the students to talk about her writing in terms of what made it a well-written essay. The students responded with answers such as "you had a lot of details," "you were descriptive about the decorations, your costume," "you shared a funny story about how you and your sister fought over the smiley face Halloween pumpkin candy bucket," and "your voice when you read got really excited." She then asked the students to discuss the topics they were considering for their own personal essays, which capitalized on the social nature of writing. Phillip used teacher demonstration. He prepared his students to write an analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by first leading a discussion of its themes. He then defined the task for them by saying, "To write an essay, you need to take one of those themes and figure out ways that the book supports it with details from the text." Finally, he had the students work in small groups to discuss one of the themes that a student identified in preparation for working on their own essays in the writing lab during subsequent days.

When we observed Cade, it was clear that he understood the value of pre-writing. He gave students a handout that structured a pre-writing exercise designed to help prepare them to write a persuasive essay. He also structured small group discussions in which they could generate reasons for their opinions prior to writing. These instructional procedures represent a move away from the transmission model but do not quite approach the apprenticeship model that the teachers seemed to believe would be most effective.

Other contextual factors required for effective writing instruction. Throughout our interviews, it seemed that even though teachers felt that their pre-service teaching courses did not prepare them to teach and assess writing, they had a sense of what effective writing instruction should be. All five recounted that writing is a process that is contextual and not easily mastered. Each mentioned that effective writing instruction requires modeling good writing, showing students good examples, offering multiple opportunities for revision, and providing timely and authentic feedback. Nadia stated, "Effective writing instruction is individualized, progressive and dynamic. It changes with the student and helps them to grow in skill and confidence." Phillip concurred, "Ideally, good writing instruction focuses on the process of becoming a writer and realizes that writing is different from genre to genre and discipline to discipline." Cade had similar ideas: "Though feedback may be considered subjective, I'd call it individualized. Good assessment and instruction focuses on each unique writing task in its own context."

Arnold recounted adjusting his writing instruction and assessment recently. He had previously followed a traditional *assign, grade, return* model of instruction and assessment and had not felt his students were able to improve their writing. He decided to change this instruction to be more individual and implemented conferencing that focuses on individual students. However, Arnold conceded that this has been taxing and something he has only been able to do with two of his senior level classes that have fewer than twenty students in each section. The other teachers recounted similar beliefs and frustrations about effective writing instruction. For the most part, the teachers were unable to enact effective instruction and assessment in a satisfying way in their classes because of their workload and time constraints.

The curriculum for tenth grade English at this school is highly circumscribed and focuses heavily on teaching literature, for example, *Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Julius Caesar*. A substantial amount of time is spent reading aloud the texts in class followed by lecture and discussion. Most writing assignments are tied to the literature mandated by the English department for tenth grade English. These assignments include personal narrative, reading reflections, and thematic literary analysis about the assigned reading. All assignments are between two and five pages, and are completed in class, specifically in the English writing lab. Though writing prompts for personal narratives and reading reflections vary, the common required writing assignment for both fall and spring semesters is a thematic literary analysis paper, which students write in class throughout the readings of both *Lord of the Flies* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in preparation for an essay question on the end of reading test. Other writing includes chapter summaries and reading reflections in an effort to teach the reading comprehension skills of summarization and connection, both of which appear on the tenth grade English common formative assessment. In addition to this skills-based curriculum of reading comprehension, grammar is taught in isolation at the beginning of the class through direct teacher instruction and student revision of teacher given sentences that are written on the board and which students complete in a grammar notebook. Students progress through grammar instruction by beginning to learn parts of speech, parts of sentences, and then paragraph analysis, labeling these items in the example sentences given them by their teachers.

We can see that the curriculum that the teachers must use and the class sizes they contend with are both barriers to the goals of effective writing instruction and improved writing achievement. Clearly, until the macrostructures of schooling, including curriculum, budgets, and scheduling can be changed, teachers will continue to struggle to provide effective writing instruction and students will continue to struggle as writers.

Significance of Findings

Throughout the writing instruction and assessment literature, much attention has been focused on the need for improving student writing by giving students more opportunities to write, providing them with individualized and specific feedback, and offering instruction that focuses on the writing process rather than the writing product. Although this research is well intended, much of it fails to take into account the context of the high school curriculum, or the complexity of writing instruction in relation to the time constraints of high school English teachers. The findings in the current study add to the limited body of literature investigating the difficulties faced by teachers trying to establish best practices in writing instruction and assessment in a traditional classroom teaching environment—one that lends itself better to the dispensing and retrieving of information, rather than apprenticing writers who can write for a variety of situations, audiences and tasks. Specifically, by observing and interviewing a group of new high school English teachers, we found that they feel that the writing instruction they received as students in their own K-12 education did not prepare them to be effective writers, nor did they perceive their preservice preparation as helpful. In spite of this perception, they seem to have absorbed principles of effective writing instruction, most likely ones they encountered in their preservice methods courses. In any case, they do face difficulties as they try to enact better writing instruction and assessment in a teaching environment that overloads their time such that they can teach writing only minimally and with very little actual feedback and assessment on student writing.

Implications

In this study, although the teachers claimed to have experienced poor modeling in their own formative writing instruction, assessment, and training, this was not what hindered their ability to provide better instruction for their own students. These teachers indicated knowledge of effective writing instruction, and, rather than replicate the instruction and assessment they had received themselves, they sincerely wished to implement research-based practices in their own classrooms. Still, Huot (2002) asserts that it is all too easy for

even well-informed teachers to respond to student writing only in terms of its correctness rather than addressing its meaning. However, it is apparent from interviews with these teachers that they do understand that writing is a contextual and complex process that is situated differently for each genre and discipline. The interviewees espoused knowledge of effective writing instruction methods, but they are frustrated when it comes to using these methods. The interviewees identified high school schedules and class sizes as among the factors that make it difficult for teachers to enact what they know.

Efforts for training teachers of writing should be focused on helping them to bridge the divide between theory and practice and on assisting them to create environments for effective writing instruction and assessment that work within the constraints of a typical high school English curriculum, schedule, and class size. Advice on how to reduce the paper load for teachers is abundant. Williams (2005) offers time-efficient methods such as structured peer review and checklists while Berg (2005) recommends that some writing assignments involve students collaborating in pairs. Morrison (2005) provides concrete suggestions for incorporating ungraded writing assignments into a typical secondary school curriculum arguing that the quality of students' writing increases when they have more low-stakes opportunities to write. The teachers in this study sense a gap between knowing and doing what is best for their students' writing development. Whether moving toward more effective (and frequent) writing instruction requires a paradigm shift in their concept of teaching, only some tweaks to their instructional habits, or a fundamental change in the instructional conditions of high school in the United States, remains unknown.

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About the Authors

Sylvia Read is associate professor in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University, Logan, Utah. ***Melanie Landon-Hays*** is assistant professor of literacy education at Western Oregon University.