Student Voices on Writing

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Abstract: This study sought to understand how our students viewed themselves as writers, particularly in relation to their self-identified best piece of college writing. Our study was conducted with 104 undergraduate students at a medium-sized public university. Students responded to a survey asking open-ended questions about their best paper in college. Responses were analyzed to identify four broad themes: paper attributes, reflections on the process, actions taken by students, and actions taken by professor. The results led us to an examination of which pedagogical practices by faculty members enabled students to feel like they had achieved their best piece of writing. We conclude with a description of how faculty members across the disciplines can attend to both the cognitive and affective domains of writing to best help their students achieve good writing.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) programs have sought to improve student writing by extending writing pedagogy beyond the traditional composition classroom, to highlight the power of writing as a method of learning in any discipline, and to address disciplinary particularities in writing. Much of this WAC work has been guided by theories on writing and learning, as well as the sharing of best practices among teachers. This theoretical guidance has helped not only to construct an understanding of the relationship between writing and learning, but also to broaden beliefs about writing as more than a collection of mechanics and conventions. The sharing of best practices has helped to inform writing instruction and assignment design through methods such as scaffolding and peer review.

Throughout this time, faculty dialogue has been central to the spirit and success of WAC programs and has contributed significantly to the continued focus on writing, teaching, and learning among instructors and scholars. It is the importance of such faculty dialogue that has led some WAC practitioners to identify it as "the" recommended "first step" for those seeking to develop WAC programs at a given institution (Walvoord, 2000).

While this dialogue has been valuable, it has largely failed to include a significant segment of WAC stakeholders: students. While understandable, given the difficulties of including students in such conversations (e.g., issues of experience, power, and time), this absence creates an informational gap that hampers WAC instructors and scholars from developing deeper understanding and more effective practices of the teaching and learning of writing across the curriculum.

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Therefore, in order to learn more about our students as writers, we must tune into the voices of students. As Hass and Osborn (2007) point out, "It is at the nexus of faculty and student understanding of writing assignments where real improvement in student writing may occur" (para. 5). Our research explores this nexus by analyzing students' perceptions of their own writing assignments, along with the writing skills and practices they employ to fulfill their professors' expectations. To accomplish this, we turn first to theories of writing that, through their portrayal of the writing process as composed of both cognitive and affective elements, support our focus on the voices of our students. Next, we describe our research setting, design, sample, and methods of qualitative data analysis. This is followed by the results of that analysis: the four general themes we identified, along with examples of each. Having laid out those themes, we proceed with a discussion of their implications for WAC pedagogical practices.

Theorizing from Students' Perspectives on Writing

The move to include student voices in our understandings of writing pedagogy shares something with recent projects to engage students more fundamentally in effective teaching. Alison Cook-Sather has been a powerful voice in this movement, seeking to incorporate student perspectives to improve learning and teaching, and to engage students as partners in this practice. As noted above, Cook-Sather (2016) also argues for the insufficiency of a dialogue on teaching and learning that has not fully integrated the voices of learners, emphasizing the insights that students can provide for the improvement of teaching and learning. This has important implications for what we do in the classroom and beyond. Such a dialogue stands as the foundation for the development of student-faculty partnerships that make negotiation and transparency a key variable in engaged learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). These goals of transparency and incorporation also inform our project to better understand student perspectives on writing and to integrate these views more fully into processes of teaching and learning. While Cook-Sather's work has not focused specifically on teaching writing, other scholarship has helped to provide a beginning for thinking about students' perspectives on writing.

One such helpful area of research has been that into students' abilities to transfer their knowledge of writing from one context to the next. Wardle (2007) collected longitudinal data from seven students, all members of the same first-year writing course, and each pursuing a different major. Starting with their common first-year writing course, Wardle collected samples of the students' writing from the classes they took across the university in order to complete their degrees. Analysis of this longitudinal data revealed that the one aspect these students appeared to have demonstrated over time was "meta-awareness about writing" (p. 76), the ability to analyze writing assignments in order to write in a way that earned them the grade they wanted. Even samples from the semester immediately following their initial writing course showed that none of the seven had transferred their learning of textual features, the writing process, or research skills to their writing for other courses. Similarly, other researchers found that students struggled to transfer their knowledge of genre, audience, and rhetorical situation, and that students were similarly focused on writing in order to receive a good grade (Nowacek, 2011; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). Yancey et al. (2014) noted that prior knowledge of writing process and experience, along with students' positive beliefs about the adequacy of their prior knowledge of writing, were key factors influencing their ability to transfer their learning about writing to contexts outside of a writing course.

Other research into students' perspectives on writing focuses on the cognitive and affective aspects of writing. Some of this work can be understood as part of a broader inquiry into student motivation. One basic finding of this work is that one's level of motivation, and thus performance, is generated through the interactions of both cognitive and affective elements. Students who say that they like to write or feel more positively toward writing also say that they are more engaged in the

process and motivated to do their best work. As Jones states, writing is "not just a cognitive activity…[but] emotional as well" (Jones, 2008, p. 214).

An especially relevant aspect of students' cognitions and emotions is their self-efficacy beliefs, judgments of their own ability to perform specific tasks. Students with higher self-efficacy in terms of writing seem to have better writing self-regulation, lower apprehension toward writing, and higher writing achievement (Ekholm, Zumbrunn, & Conklin, 2015; Jones, 2008; Sanders-Reio, Alexander, Reio, & Newman, 2014). This research suggests that students' personal beliefs about their own writing abilities, along with their attitudes toward the writing process, have important consequences for their writing success.

Researchers have also demonstrated that students' beliefs about writing and the writing process, in general, have similar power: "Beliefs about the nature of writing and what constitutes good writing are likely to affect students' engagement and motivations" (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Graham, 2016, p. 33). Therefore, a student's general conceptualization of and beliefs about writing influence her beliefs about a specific writing task—how she represents the writing task to herself. This, then, influences her approach to that writing task, the strategies and tactics she adopts, and, in turn, the results she achieves. For example, MacArthur, Philippakos, and Graham (2016) found that better writers were much more likely to talk about writing in terms of content and meaning, while weaker writers tended to stress conventions. Yancey et al. (2014) found that the students they followed defined writing as "a vehicle for authorial expression, not as a vehicle for dialogue or an opportunity to make knowledge" (p. 111). As a result, students were focused on writing to please their professor and show they cared about the assignment.

This content versus convention distinction has its roots in cognitive theories of writing based upon study of the writing processes of expert and novice writers. For example, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) describe two ways of writing. Novice writers tend to engage in "knowledge telling." In knowledge telling, the writer draws from three sources to produce a text: the topic, his or her discourse knowledge, and the text he or she has already written. The topic helps the writer retrieve information from memory and put it onto paper. Knowledge of the discourse associated with the appropriate genre or academic discipline helps the writer select the kinds of elements to include in the writing and their general arrangement. Finally, the text he has previously produced helps the writer attend to what remains to be said. Bereiter and Scardamalia describe the "process" through which novice writers produce knowledge telling: "the writer can get started in a matter of seconds…, makes use of readily available knowledge…, [and] requires no significantly greater amount of planning or goal-setting than does ordinary conversation" (1987, p. 9).

Expert writers, however, engage in "knowledge transforming" writing. This concept is rooted in the idea that thoughts and knowledge come into existence through writing. Expert writers consider "whether the text they have written says what they want it to say and whether they themselves believe what the text says. In the process, they are likely to consider not only changes in the text but also changes in what they want to say" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). As a result, for the writer, knowledge-transforming writing leads to learning. Knowledge transforming writing promotes a two-way interaction between the development of knowledge and the development of the text.

While Bereiter and Scardamalia focused more on cognitive aspects of writing, Lavelle (1993) also incorporated its affective aspects. Lavelle distinguished between some student writers' "deep approaches," characterized by emotional and personal involvement, a focus on revision, and strong audience awareness, and others' "surface approaches," characterized by a one-step, single-draft, writing process that is spontaneous and impulsive. "Writers using deep approaches had a stronger sense of audience and revised more both globally and locally. Those using surface approaches were

less invested in their writing, used fewer writing strategies, and were less aware of their audience and writing process" (as cited in Sander-Reio et al., 2014, p. 2).

These convention/content, knowledge telling/transforming, and surface/deep distinctions are similar to the contrasting views of writing discussed by White and Bruning (2005): writing as "transmission" or as "transaction." To conceive of one's writing as transmission is to identify its primary purpose as conveing to the reader information from previous writers on the topic. To view it as transaction is to identify its purpose as deepening the writer's own understanding of the topic. One significant difference between these views is the level of personal, and even emotional, involvement of the writer. A transaction view involves the writer not only as the active constructor of arguments, but also, through increased learning and understanding, as the primary beneficiary of her own writing process. A transmission view involves the writer simply as a vehicle to move ideas from one location to another. It is not surprising that White and Bruning (2005) found that students with high transaction beliefs tended to earn higher scores on written work than those with high transmission beliefs.

In all of these distinctions it seems clear that an investment in the writing process benefits student writing outcomes. Whether it is a belief in writing as meaning-making, a deeper recognition of audience, or a willingness to use more writing strategies, each of these distinctions draws attention to a personal and emotional commitment and connection to writing that aids student writing and learning.

Problematic Aspects of Students' Writing Processes and Products

In addition to this relatively macro-level work on the role of students' beliefs and emotions about writing, scholars have examined student perspectives on specific aspects or stages of the writing process. This research reveals that students often struggle most with the beginning stages of writing: getting started, focusing, and identifying a topic (Head, 2013; Plata, 2008). Kolb, Longest, and Jensen (2013) conducted interviews with eight students each semester over the course of four semesters to gain a better understanding of the writing processes they used and to discover whether their writing processes changed over the two-year period. They found that, on average, at the beginning of students' first writing-intensive seminars, they were better planners and revisers than prewriters or drafters. By the end of their fourth seminars, students had become even better planners and revisers, but had not improved much at prewriting or drafting. Over the four semesters, students had invested the most time and effort into the beginning and ending stages of writing, building upon their strengths, rather than reducing their deficiencies. The reasons students gave for this "bookend" strategy were pragmatic: limited time and multiple deadlines, along with the observation that professors often held them accountable for planning and revision via requirements to participate in early instructor meetings and later peer-review sessions. Professors were far less likely to require or check on the middle stages, students' prewriting and drafting.

Studies of students' writing products have identified additional problems, particularly in the construction of effective arguments. For example, in a longitudinal study of twelve students moving from first-year writing courses into more advanced writing in their majors, Johnson and Krase (2012) found that first-year writers struggled to posit arguable propositions and to offer sufficient evidence to support those claims. Over the course of the semester and more advanced writing courses, however, the researchers found overall improvement in those students' ability to articulate claims and marshal compelling evidence.

In a larger exploration of student writing products, the Citation Project (Jamieson, 2013) analyzed 800 pages of first-year student writing to understand how students used sources within their writing. They found that students primarily cited a source only once, that the material was usually obtained

from within the first three pages of the source, and that students rarely used summary as a writing strategy. These findings suggest that first-year students are still in the process of learning to produce writing attributes that tend to serve as important markers of successful writing by faculty: quality ideas, clear and precise claims, relevant evidence, and integration of sources within an argument.

Asking Students about Writing

The studies reviewed above point to the interactive relationships among students' beliefs and feelings about writing, the writing strategies they employ, and the quality of the writing they produce. Developing our understanding of these relationships will enable not only a deeper appreciation of the challenges and needs of student writers, but also the development of more effective, student-centered strategies and methods of writing pedagogy. One tactic through which to pursue this strategy is to ask students about their writing. Many of the researchers noted above did this through in-depth interviews, even over time, of a small sample of students.

Hass and Osborn (2007) also adopted this tactic, but through a survey, enabling them to reach more students. They asked students to reflect on their previous success in academic writing, state what they thought made for good writing, and discuss the strategies that had been most useful to them in producing good writing. Analysis of these responses revealed five "themes" or contributing factors prominent in students' reports of personal writing success: personal engagement, commitment, collaboration, systemic approach, and external confirmation. The researchers then offered suggestions for facilitating students' production of their best work through incorporating these success factors into the (re-)design of writing assignments. To summarize, these researchers drew insights from students' perspectives on writing in order to suggest ways for instructors to improve their practices of assignment design and writing pedagogy.

In considering student perspectives on writing as an important source of insight for improving writing instruction and assignment design, our study builds upon the work of Hass and Osborn (2007). We sought to learn about the writing processes that students followed, as well as the paper attributes or qualities of good writing they identified. We were curious whether the reflections of our undergraduate students, who come from a range of backgrounds and experiences, would be similar to those of the students Hass and Osborn studied. Moving beyond Hass and Osborn (2007), we were also interested in students' perceptions of the influence that their professors' actions had on their writing processes and products. These concerns led us to pursue answers to several research questions: 1) How do our students view themselves as writers? 2) How do our students know when they have achieved good writing? 3) Which faculty actions -- pedagogical practices -- do students view as effective at helping them produce good writing? and 4) How can faculty members across the disciplines use students' answers to these questions to facilitate their own students' achievement of good writing?

Setting and Survey Design

Our study was conducted with undergraduate students at a medium-sized public university. Many of our students are first generation college students or come from families of low or middle socioeconomic status. The Writing Across the Curriculum program has been in place for more than ten years and has had a strong influence on faculty development and the creation of writing-intensive courses. All students at the university must take at least five writing-intensive courses. These include two semesters of first-year writing, first- or second-year seminars from any discipline, one course from a variety of disciplines across campus that offer writing intensive courses, and one that is specific to a student's major. Student enrollment caps for writing-intensive courses range from 15 to 25 students to provide time for the professor and students to work together on their writing.

Following Hass and Osborne (2007), we developed an online survey through which to collect data from student participants. This instrument began with an explanation of the project and a request for the participant's consent, per IRB protocol. The participant was then asked to respond to seven open-ended questions:

- Think of the best paper that you've written in college. Describe it briefly below.
- What was so good about that paper?
- Name two or three ways that you knew the paper was good.
- What are two or three things you did that led to your success with writing this paper? What was different about this paper from other less successful papers you have written?
- What did the professor do that was helpful to you in writing your paper?
- What challenges do you usually face in your writing? How did you overcome these in this paper?
- What would it take for you to write a paper as good as or better than the one you have described? What do you need as far as assignment, time, length, discussions, and workshops?

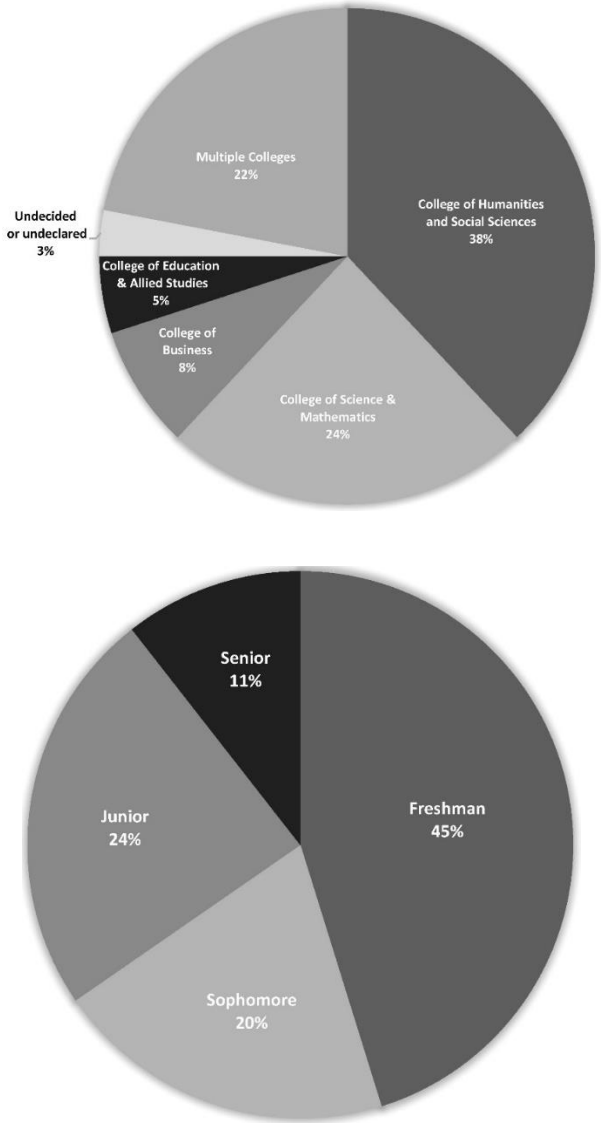
Several of these questions were adapted from the Hass and Osborn (2007) study described previously. Similar to them, we wished to capture something of the students' tacit writing knowledge by asking them to discuss their successful writing in the form of an actual, concrete paper, rather than as a set of abstract ideas. We did make minor edits to some of their questions. In an attempt to obtain richer data, we asked specifically that students provide "two or three" responses each to questions 3 and 4. We added questions 5 and 6, asking students about actions faculty had taken to support or facilitate their writing success. In responses to this question we sought to identify specific, effective practices faculty could continue to use or adopt to help their students produce good writing, and to gather information especially useful for future WAC faculty development.

After answering these open-ended questions, participants rated their own writing ability on a 7-point scale from 1, *not very strong* to 7, *very strong*. Finally, participants answered some brief demographic questions (year in school, major, and minor) and indicated their name and professor's name in case they were earning extra credit through their participation. The survey ended with a short debriefing statement.

Student Participants

To recruit student participants for this study, we sent an email to all campus members of the WAC Network, a group of faculty who have been active, consistent participants in WAC workshops and other programming. The email included an explanation of the study and a link to the online survey for faculty to send to their students. Upon an instructor's request, members of the research team visited classrooms to talk directly to students about the purpose of the project and how to participate. While student responses were to remain confidential, we offered to provide professors with a list of the students who had completed the survey, as several professors wished to give extra credit to those respondents.

Figure 1. Composition of Sample



Through the recruitment efforts of seven faculty members, we obtained 104 completed student survey responses. As illustrated in Figure 1, our student sample was composed of 45% freshmen, 20% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 11% seniors. As a group, the students reported majors from all of the colleges at our university: 38% from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 24% from the College of Science and Mathematics, 8% from the College of Education & Allied Studies, and 5% from the College of Business. An additional 3% of the sample stated that they were undecided or had not declared a major, and 22% reported majors in multiple colleges. The vast majority of this last group listed elementary or early childhood education as one of their majors, along with a required second major outside the field of education. The distribution of majors represented in our sample is roughly equivalent to that of our student body, although our sample somewhat overrepresents the College of Science and Mathematics and underrepresents the College of Business.

In general, the students reported fairly modest views of their own writing ability. Asked to rate their writing ability on a 7-point scale from *not very strong (1)* to *very strong (7),* respondents' self-ratings averaged 4.53 (*SD*=1.43). Interestingly, the sample's self-assessment is in line with the results of a university-wide assessment initiative in which faculty analyzed and scored a stratified random

sample of student writing products (n=174) selected from writing intensive in the major courses (n=34). Scored along a range of 2 (lowest) to 8 (highest), the papers sampled averaged 6.01 (Bridgewater State University, 2016, p. 2). So, our sample students' modest assessments of their writing *skills* matched up rather well with the university faculty's modest assessment of their sample students' writing *products.*

In brief, although our student sample was not random, at least along the dimensions described above, it turned out to be reasonably representative of the student population. Next, having laid out our methods of data collection and recruitment, and described our sample of student writers, we continue with an account of the methods of qualitative data analysis we developed to "hear" the voices of our respondents.

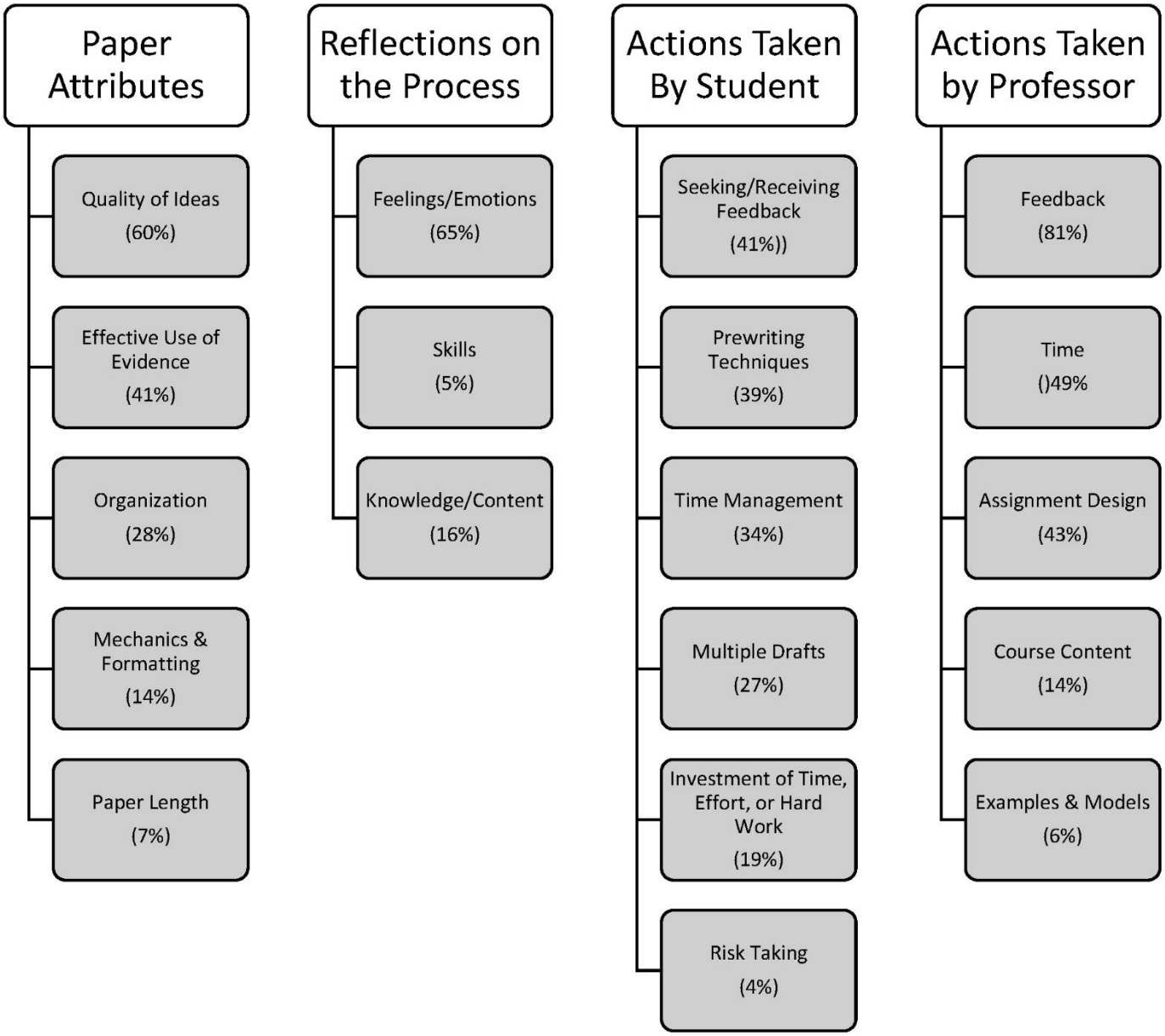
Qualitative Data Analysis

We used an iterative, inductive coding method to generate themes represented in students' responses to our seven open-ended survey questions. We began by identifying themes that emerged from the responses to each individual question. In doing so, we noticed that responses to many of the questions overlapped, as participants had included answers to two or more questions within their response to a single question (e.g., including something a *professor* did to help with the paper in a response to the question asking what helpful actions the *student* had taken). Therefore, we refined our coding method. Working from the themes that had emerged from responses to each individual question, we identified a non-overlapping set of response themes representative of all of the responses to all seven questions. Through this process four distinct themes emerged: attributes of the paper, reflections on the paper/process, actions by the student, and actions by the professor. Each participant's responses were re-coded by two research team members: one person coded all of the data, and two others each coded half of the data. After the first round of coding, the coders averaged 79% agreement overall. The coders discussed instances of disagreement, refined the definition of each theme, and recoded the data accordingly, resulting in a final average agreement of 87%.

Results

See Figure 2 for a summary of our coding scheme and an estimate of the frequency of each code. We present each of the four broad themes we identified through the inductive process described above and provide examples of student responses that exemplify each of the themes. The discussion following this section will connect these themes to our research questions and to previous research.

Figure 2. Coding Scheme and Estimated Frequency of Each Code



Theme 1: Paper Attributes

Particularly in their responses to the first three survey questions (listed in Survey Design section above), nearly all respondents cited *attributes* of their best paper, which we defined as features required or expected in the paper that can be seen in the paper by others. Among these attributes were the *(high) quality of ideas, effective use of evidence, organization, mechanics and format,* and *paper length.*

Within this theme, the attribute most cited was *quality of ideas*, including content development, argumentation, and originality. For example, one respondent wrote that her ability to describe and define a key concept made the paper her best:

> Since I described nihilism so well, my argument seemed bulletproof.

Another described his paper as "very detailed and insightful."

Some respondents stated that their best paper was strengthened by their having considered the topic from more than one angle, as in the following:

> I was able to present both sides of the issue objectively before weighing in on the matter with my personal opinion.

Others noted that they went beyond basic expectations and found ways to make their papers engaging ("The paper followed all the guidelines and it was also a little humorous") or original and creative. For example, one respondent wrote:

> I was very original with my ideas on ways to conserve resources. I didn't simply state to shut off the water while you brush your teeth or take shorter showers. I discussed creating compost, using hybrid cars, and carpooling. I wanted to think outside the box and describe other ways in which we can help the environment.

Use of evidence was the second most frequently mentioned paper attribute. Respondents noted quantity of sources, type of sources ("I was using a primary source for the myth") and provenance of sources ("The sources were all books from the library"). Some respondents emphasized the authority of their sources:

> I backed my views with the views of those all-time greats. I'd say in any paper where one can show Thomas Paine's line of reasoning matches ones [*sic*] own, it's safe to assume one has the best, most intellectually established position one can have.

As with quality of ideas, several respondents mentioned their personal experience or engagement with a subject as a valuable source of evidence. For example, one student described a "persuasive speech on drinking and driving" as having "a lot of facts and statistics" and also noted that "It was a topic that I am interested in and know a lot about, so I was able to include a lot of personal information."

When respondents mentioned the paper attribute *organization*, some wrote of it in a general way ("Logically and effectively ordered my main points"; "Each of my body paragraphs could have been summed up by a sentence very close to my thesis"; "Good transitions"), while others specifically noted the strength of introductions or conclusions.

Mechanics and format, including grammar, style, word choice, and citation style, was mentioned less frequently. Some mentioned this attribute in general ways ("All my works cited were properly noted"; "There were not grammar or punctuation errors"; "the language was very appropriate").

Few respondents mentioned *paper length* as a positive attribute, with just two noting that the paper they considered their best was also the longest they had written so far.

Theme 2: Reflections on the Process

As discussed earlier, the writing process is made up of both cognitive and affective elements. It is not surprising, therefore, that more than three-quarters of our respondents depicted some kind of *personal gain from,* or *positive affective response to, the process of writing their best paper.* Unlike paper attributes, these gains and emotional connections may not have been visible to someone reading the paper, but students connected these emotional aspects of the process to the success of their writing.

More than half mentioned feelings of pride, excitement, interest, or confidence. One response typifies the connection made between enjoyment of the process and the success of its outcome:

Well, I got an 'A' on it, with a lot of positive feedback. So, in that sense I knew it was good. But I also knew it was good just from the amount of enjoyment I got while writing it.

A related element of this theme was the direct connection students made between their best paper and their interest in or emotional connection to its topic:

> Being familiar with the topic made it so that I could write easily and have much to say about the topic, so it was very detailed and insightful because I was interested in the subject.
>
> I felt my writing was able to flourish while writing about something important to me. It was more heart felt and I was able to get more out of my writing because it wasn't agonizing to write, i [*sic*] actually enjoyed it.
>
> After writing it I was excited to hand it in. Since I felt so strongly about the subject the whole essay had a clear voice behind it.

Multiple respondents reported that their high level of interest and excitement helped them overcome a tendency to procrastinate. For example:

> Most of my challenges come with actually setting aside time to do my writing work. This was a topic I was excited to write about. So I was eager to begin writing it.

Some students cited the positive emotions they experienced from making the most of an opportunity to be creative or imaginative:

> It brought out my creative side which I rarely get to express. Although it was difficult for me I was really proud of it.

I usually find that I become repetitive or bored by the end of writing papers for my classes, but since this paper was a fictional account of something, I found that I was able to focus more and ended up with a surprising twist at the end, that even I hadn't seen coming.

Respondents also wrote of gaining skills, content knowledge, or new disciplinary perspectives through the process of producing their best paper:

> It was a great paper because I was able to learn while gathering information.
>
> It took me out of my comfort zone of Math to research the myth and write a paper, which I had not done much of up to that point.

Several mentioned the pride they derived from the actions they had been willing to take to overcome writing problems that might have prevented them from achieving their best paper. The range of such actions will be explored below as Theme 3, Actions Taken by Student.

> Usually, I struggle with the organization of my thoughts, and that is why I am proud of this paper. I always have many ideas, but I struggle with how to organize them properly into a successful paper. Getting extra help really helped me with this paper.
>
> I have difficulty finding resources and properly integrating them into my paper. I overcame this by looking at how the resources I was using cited their resources and I sought counsel from my professors.

Theme 3: Actions Taken by Student

Almost all students attributed the achievement of their best paper, at least in part, to specific actions they had taken during the writing process. The actions students reported having taken fell into six categories: *seeking or receiving feedback; use of prewriting techniques; time management; multiple drafts; investment of time, effort, and hard work; and risk-taking or arguing a unique or unpopular position.*

Many students stated that they had sought and received *feedback* about their paper from friends, other students, the university Writing Center, or others. These responses did not state or imply that obtaining this feedback was a required part of the assignment. Instead, it appeared to be the student who had taken the initiative to seek it out:

> Amount of feedback I got meeting with the writing fellow
>
> I had a family member look over my paper and proof read it so I knew it could be the best I could to.
>
> I knew the paper was good because I had many of my friends peer review it for me

Approximately the same number of students cited their use of *prewriting techniques*. Prewriting techniques that students reported fell into three groups: information gathering, information analysis, and outlining.

Students reported gathering information from a range of reputable sources such as libraries, online databases, online searches, interviews with experts in the field, and literary texts. Some students also cited the strength and validity of the resulting information:

> I searched for strong sources to [*sic*] quote statistics as to how much water we waste or how much money is saved when switching to solar panels.
>
> I focus on finding really strong evidence that will support my opinion since the topic is a topic that is a little bit controversial. ...What was different about this paper is that I tried to use the data base from the school which gave me more strong evidence than just random evidence online.
>
> I also did additional research and asked many questions in class about specific things and scenes from the novel and movie.
>
> Before writing this I interviewed several politicians and got their point of view on things and I also looked up several statistics.

Taking time to analyze, make sense of, and organize the information they gathered from their sources was another prewriting technique students reported:

> To prepare for writing the paper, I re-read the short story and re-watched the movie while taking important notes about both to use in my paper. Also, I made an outline to follow.
>
> This paper was more successful for me because I chose to take notes on each of the poems I would compare, and really write down as many details I could derive from each of the poems.

In particular, students identified creating an outline as a valuable pre-writing technique they had used to create their best papers:

> My biggest struggle is starting the process/beginning a paper. I could stare at a blank screen for hours. However, I have learned from peers and help from friends on ways

> to cope with this challenge. Especially this year I have learned the value in outlining before beginning a research paper or long composition. It helps to gather thoughts and organize info. I wish I had paid more attention to this technique in previous years.
>
> One major thing that lead to my success in writing this paper was that an outline was due before the paper was due. Preparing an outline ahead of time is always helpful in gathering one's thoughts about a topic.

Time management was an important action taken by students, with many noting that they began their best paper earlier than they usually did or finished it before it was due:

> I provided myself plenty of time to research the paper and understand the material I had researched.
>
> I started this paper way earlier than it was due rather than procrasting [*sic*] it until the last minute.
>
> I finished it ahead of the deadline, leaving time to go over it before it was due.

Students discussed having produced *multiple drafts* as they accomplished their best paper. They reflected on the value of multiple drafts to improve the quality of the argument, ensure grammatical and spelling accuracy, and achieve the ultimate purpose of "growing as a writer":

> Organization is the hardest for me. I usually have pretty good ideas, but organizing them in a proper way takes a lot of revision…. I overcame that problem in this paper by putting it through multiple revisions and edits until I felt it was perfect.
>
> When writing this paper, I took the time to edit it over and over again to make sure I did not miss anything.
>
> Multiple revisions seem important to me because papers are about growing as a writer, rather than receiving a grade.

Their *Investment of time, effort, and hard work* was cited by students as a key to their success on their best paper. Some mentioned the time, effort, and hard work they had invested in the paper, while others emphasized that this paper had taken longer to write than others:

> 12 revisions and easily 40 hours of work went into it.
>
> This paper was different because I took more time on it than any other paper I've written in college.
>
> And personally, I took pride in this paper and all the hard work, time, thought, and dedication I put into this paper.

Finally, a few students attributed their paper's success, at least in part, to their own *risk taking* or *arguing a unique or unpopular position*:

> It was the best paper that I have written because it was a pursuasive [*sic*] style argument, and I chose to take an unpopular stance on the issue.
>
> One thing I did that led to my success with writing this paper was that I approached the topic from a different standpoint than people usually approach the topic.

Theme 4: Actions Taken by Professor

In addition to recognizing their own actions that had enabled them to produce their best papers, almost all respondents identified one or more facilitating actions their professors had taken.

(Encouragingly, very few respondents stated that their professors had done *nothing* that contributed to the success of their papers.) From students' responses, we identified five categories of professors' beneficial actions: *feedback, time, assignment design, course content,* and *examples and models.*

Unsurprisingly, *feedback* from the professor was cited most frequently by the students as professor behavior helpful to the development of their best paper. They reported a variety of ways that professors provided feedback, including in-class workshops, one-on-one office hour consultations, and formal edits of early drafts. Some professors had built a structure for such feedback into the assignment, while others offered it less formally:

> My professor gave me a lot of feedback on my rough draft and allowed multiple revisions.
>
> [The professor] sat down with us one on one and talked about our paper and what we could do to make it better.
>
> She made us pass in a draft which she edited and then we had to make our corrections.
>
> We had two workshop days where she, and other students would go around and suggest things to make your paper better.

Approximately half of the students cited the benefit of the professor giving them enough *time,* both in- and out-of-class, to complete the assignment successfully. Because of this we removed it from the more general category, *assignment design*. Student responses in this *time* category did not discuss how the student managed time, but only the professor's helpful actions regarding time. Students stated that some professors helped them achieve their best papers by simply providing sufficient time for the assignment, giving regular reminders, or scheduling periodic due dates for drafts:

> I need workshops and spaced out checkpoints.
>
> Getting time in class to work on it is EXTREMELY helpful.
>
> I would definitely need time because a lot of my professors assign papers due within a week or shorter time, which makes it very difficult to write and do work for other classes and go to work.

In addition to professors' actions regarding *time*, students cited other beneficial aspects of professors' *assignment design.* These included writing clear prompts, explanations, and rubrics; providing specific scaffolding materials, such as outlines; and setting up supporting structures, such as writing-focused workshops and required drafts:

> She explained what she expected from the paper very clearly. She also helped us step by step when writing the essay and was very clear on what she wanted us to fix or talk about more on.
>
> She explained what she was looking for in the paper and showed examples of what makes a great research paper that helped follow the outline for a better end result.
>
> The prompt was clear, the expectations explicit and freedom granted for writing on a topic (poem) i [*sic*] felt comfortable with rather than one she chose for me.
>
> She put us in groups for a peer workshop, in which we read our papers out loud to groups, and our group members give us feedback on what should be improved or fixed and suggestions how to do so.

Along with the helpfulness of professors' inclusion of such structural features in their assignments, students acknowledged the benefit of professors designing their assignments to allow students to choose paper topics of interest to them. For example:

> [The professor] let me write about the things i [*sic*] want to talk about in my paper.
>
> Everything about the paper was really good because i [*sic*] had the freedom to just write and i [*sic*] write the best when i [*sic*] get to pick my own topic and write about it.
>
> Because I was required to incorporate personal details into this paper, it made it a more enjoyable process, unlike the typical assigned papers and topics. I had a personal connection and therefore a genuine interest and reason to become engaged.
>
> The thing that was good for this paper was the fact that I got to write about what I wanted to write about. And what I believe and what I feel, which I think makes the best essay ever.

Some respondents cited a fourth category, the *course content* that the professor had provided, as helpful in writing their best paper:

> My professor discussed major themes in class to help the students write successful papers.
>
> We had a class discussion about the reading to help the class understand it better.
>
> His lectures on the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment were more than enough to give us students a sufficient understanding of the time period and the historical context of Voltaire's novella.

Professors providing *examples* of what they were expecting and *modeling* specific aspects of the writing process were helpful actions reported by a few students:

> The professor showed us an example of someone's paper from the past and he pointed out what that person did right and what that person did wrong in their paper.
>
> He showed us different ways to argue your point.
>
> Finally—and mercifully—only a small number of respondents stated that their professors had taken *no actions* that helped them create their best paper:
>
> My professor didn't do much to help me, he had us do partner work, which helped me a little bit change some stuff around.
>
> Nothing, I was told to go to the Writing Center if I had trouble.

Intertwining Themes

Before moving on to our discussion, we offer one additional student response, as it provides an excellent example of the "overlapping responses" issue that prompted us to revise our original coding scheme (See above, Methods of Qualitative Analysis). This example displays the intertwining nature in the student's experience of three of our four themes. She writes, "I was incredibly proud (Theme 2, Reflections) of the structure of this essay as well as the flow of words" (Theme 1, Paper Attributes). She continues, explaining the reasons for her pride in having produced a well-organized paper (Theme 2, Reflections), along with the actions she took to do so (Theme 3, Actions by Student):

> I usually face the challenge of writing too much. I have a habit of thinking all details are important, when, in fact, they aren't [Theme 2, Reflections]. I overcame this in this

> paper by really focusing on the structure of my essay, deciding what details would make it a strong paper, and which would make it a poor read [Theme 3, Actions by Student].

Thus, while we have separated these themes for analytical purposes, we must acknowledge that they may be intertwined in the lived experiences of our students.

Discussion and Implications: How Students Recognize and Achieve Good Writing

Although we coded our student responses differently than Hass and Osborn (2007), many of the themes they identified were also present in our results. As in their study, our students cited personal engagement, external confirmation through grades, commitment to the process in terms of time and effort, collaboration, and a systematic approach as keys to achieving good writing. While Hass and Osborn found that paper length was important to students as evidence of their commitment to the work, our analysis showed that paper length was seldom mentioned. Apparently, while our respondents also saw commitment to the task as important, very few of them used paper length as a measure of that commitment, citing instead hard work, conscientiousness, and effective time management.

Our analysis also shows that students recognized the role of engaging in the writing process (planning, prewriting, drafting, revising) to achieve good writing. The students in Hass and Osborne's (2007) study seemed to hint at the need to follow this process, but were not as explicit as our students. Our students pointed out that they utilized prewriting and drafting techniques in order to accomplish good writing. This is significant for it is in these steps that ideas are often refined and developed, yet students typically neglect these steps of the process (Kolb, Longest, & Jensen, 2013). The discrepancy between Kolb, Longest, & Jensen's findings and our own can perhaps be attributed to the fact that we drew our sample from courses taught by faculty within the WAC network on our campus. These are faculty likely to be familiar with scaffolding techniques and the importance of emphasizing pre-writing techniques in the writing process. The students in our sample acknowledged the importance of the prewriting and drafting steps. Faculty can support this need through assigning more prewriting and drafting activities as either in-class or out-of-class tasks. Several of the students in our study mentioned prewriting assignments explicitly as one of the actions faculty took that helped them to produce their best writing. As an additional benefit, this attention to prewriting and drafting may also encourage more careful reading practices. As Jamieson (2013) describes, understanding how students use sources reveals an important set of concerns about their quality of reading. Asking students to engage in more prewriting activities to account for the material they are reading may be one way to improve not only their engagement with the reading material, but also their writing processes.

Students stated that seeking feedback from their professor was a key action they took to achieve their best papers, while also citing the benefit they derived from their professor's actions to provide feedback to them, either personally or through peer evaluation activities. The nexus of actions to seek and to provide feedback is the practice of revision, central to the students' writing process if they are to achieve good writing. Previous research shows that much pedagogical attention is typically paid to the revision process (Kolb, Longest, & Jensen, 2013), so students have engaged in revision multiple times over the course of their school careers and found it useful for producing their best writing. Further, in one study of the production of scholarly writing, many students identified processes of feedback and critique to be extremely influential in the growth of their understanding (Ekholm, Zumbrunn, & Conklin, 2015). Given the key role of feedback in the writing process, additional research into students' perceptions and interpretations of feedback, and the effectiveness of various

types or forms of faculty feedback could provide a better understanding of this important aspect of the student writing process.

Respondents cited additional helpful assignment design choices professors had made, particularly scheduling sufficient time for them to meet their professor's expectations, and providing clear, specific instructions and written guidelines for assignments. Clarity and specificity notwithstanding, a writing assignment should offer enough freedom of choice to engage student interest and motivate investment in the paper. Describing their best paper, many of our students highlighted their interest and excitement in their topic. Some went even further, asserting that their paper was good precisely because they had been able to choose a topic they were passionate about, rather than having to pursue a topic assigned by the professor. The tension between specificity and freedom of choice is especially interesting in light of findings from Project Information Literacy that show that students find topic selection to be one of the most challenging aspects of a research project (Head, 2013). To facilitate students' achievement of good writing, WAC programs should encourage faculty to explore the tension between clear, specific instructions in assignment design and freedom of student choice, and place special emphasis on guiding students through the process of topic selection.

As cited above, researchers have found that beliefs, not only about oneself as a writer, but also about writing in general, have important consequences for writing success. Thus, we sought to find out how our students portrayed themselves as writers, as well as how they conceptualized the writing process. Whether they thought of writing as a process of (re)transmitting facts and experts' opinions or as a space for developing their own ideas may have made a difference in how they approached their writing tasks. As quality of ideas was the paper attribute most cited by our students in their best paper, it would seem that those students consider the influence of the text on themselves as writers and on potential readers, thus believing writing to be more than just knowledge telling but rather knowledge transforming (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

Interestingly, students' beliefs about their best paper centered much more on their feelings and emotions rather than their skill development as writers or the knowledge they gained through the process of writing. In other words, students did not view their best paper as one through which they learned something, whether content or process, but instead, as one where their feeling of confidence in the text they had produced was high. This was also true in Yancey et al.'s (2014) study where students' standards for assessing their writing were based on the grades they were receiving throughout a writing course, leading them "to see writing dichotomously, as either good or bad, and to see themselves similarly" (p. 107). This reflects a more product- than process-focused approach to writing. Our respondents' apparent product focus could have been the result of the survey questions we asked or our phrasing of the questions. For example, none of our survey questions asked respondents specifically to list what they had learned through writing their best paper. Alternatively, students' product focus also could have been a consequence of their not being tuned in to the critical importance of process in the creation of good writing, or even to the reasons why they are required to write papers in college. No matter its cause, students' apparent product focus provides a fruitful site for teaching and learning, where faculty can broach ideas about the point of writing itself. Yancey et al. (2014) recommends building into a course an emphasis for students on metacognition about the larger purpose of writing as well as the use of the writing process to develop their work. Such a pedagogical intervention may facilitate students' deeper understanding of the perspective and needs of their audience and the cognitive and communicative developmental reasons for requiring student writing.

Conclusion

Our primary goal in pursuing this research into students' views of their own writing was to inform future WAC programming for faculty development. Therefore, we turn to a concluding discussion of the ways our findings are useful to faculty and to WAC programs. Our findings validate long-standing WAC practitioners' "best practices": scaffolding assignments, providing models and examples of successful student work, allowing adequate time for students to complete assignments, providing feedback on multiple iterations of student writing, and offering students some freedom to explore topics, ideas, and issues they care about.

Importantly, our findings also point to the need for recognizing how the cognitive and affective aspects of writing are integrated. The activities of students and professors can promote the integration of cognitive and affective aspects of writing, leading to greater student engagement with the writing process. Recall Jones's (2008) observation that "writing is not just a cognitive activity [but] emotional as well" (2008, p. 214, *op. cit.).* One emotional aspect of student writing concerns their engagement with the content. Faculty should recognize the emotional and personal investment students must have in order to engage in the practices that lead to good writing. Not only do students report the importance of a personal connection to writing as significant to writing success, but that this personal connection can also have an influence on a student's willingness to devote the necessary time to engage in prewriting activities and to seek out additional feedback from faculty and peers. Offering students some element of choice in topic can help to create and sustain this personal connection.

Of course, not every college assignment will lend itself to immediate and direct personal connection between student and content. Fortunately, our survey reveals additional ways in which the cognitive-affective link can be activated. Recall that respondents noted pride in their work, the satisfaction of having increased their knowledge, and even the rewards of stepping out of their comfort zones as affective dimensions of the writing process. These were mentioned less frequently than personal connection, though, indicating that we as instructors may need to be more active in encouraging students to expand their perceptions of the payoffs of academic writing. For instance, we might design our assignments with Lavelle's (1993) "deep approaches" in mind, asking students to articulate their *audience*'s connection to the topic as well as their own connection to the audience. Similarly, drawing on White and Bruning (2005), we might be explicit in discussing the differences between writing as "transmission" and writing as "transaction," encouraging students to build a perception of themselves as transactive writers. Or, like Yancey et al. (2014) recommends, we might ask students to create their own frameworks for what writing is, drawing on their prior knowledge and successful experiences with the writing process and products and guiding them to revisit that knowledge in light of what they have learned in a current course.

Even with sound assignment design, many students face challenges when pushing their writing to a better draft, and frustration results. Therefore, faculty should consider engaging in behaviors/actions that students judge helpful. For example, working with students in person on their writing not only provides the cognitive benefits of direct feedback on students' writing but also an avenue for the instructor to provide encouragement and other emotional support. WAC leaders can draw on the results of this and other studies of student perceptions of writing to help faculty see the benefits of devoting time, both in and out of the classroom, to those "middle stages" of the writing process that often get lost in the churn of the semester. We can distinguish a balanced scaffolding approach from a "bookend" method, and the larger ecosystem of writing support across campus can be part of this approach. For example, instructors might encourage students to use the Writing Center at an intermediate point in the writing process, rather than as a final check right before a paper is due. Additionally, instructors might be explicit about the expert practices of writers, both describing them

and demonstrating them, and pointing out where students are attaining them, even if by small measure (Yancey et al., 2014).

Attending to these affective components of writing acknowledges and normalizes the difficulties students may face in their writing, which can in turn boost students' confidence and increase their engagement with the writing process, a necessary ingredient for student success.

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