Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives on Writing: Empirical Results from the Social Work Discipline

Christopher D. Kilgore and Courtney Cronley
University of Texas at Arlington

Abstract: Studies examining student writing challenges often fail to consider how instructors' perspectives align with students' perspectives. The present study is designed to help improve writing instruction and support by analyzing comparative data on student (*n*=244) and instructor (*n*=44) perceptions of writing assignments and process activities within one social-work department. Results indicate that students and instructors differ in how they label and understand primary writing genres, creating potential challenges for successful instruction, and that they also differ in how they use or recommend writing process activities. By recommending outside support resources rather than integrating writing into in-class activities, instructors may be unintentionally inhibiting students' writing abilities by encouraging a grade-driven instrumental attitude toward writing. Further interdisciplinary writing instruction and resources and enhanced instructor preparation may help improve how effectively students enact primary social work genres.

For several decades now, instructors and administrators in the discipline of social work have recognized a unique need for effective writing, since social-work students exit their academic studies directly into a career involving high-stakes communication on behalf of highly vulnerable clients, who face issues that may threaten their lives or livelihoods. To that end, social-work departments have begun embracing interventions modeled on a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) approach, integrating writing more thoroughly into the curriculum, and offering additional discipline-specific writing support. Such interdisciplinary writing initiatives stand at the nexus of multiple perspectives on writing—the student, the classroom instructor, and the writing specialist. And yet, although some studies within the first-year composition (FYC) setting have examined students' attitudes (e.g. Leki, 2006; Lindenman, 2015; Lucas, Cox, Croudace, & Milford, 2004), the convergence (or divergence) of student and instructor perspectives on writing in discipline-specific settings is an area seldom studied in detail (see the most recent review of the literature on the subject, by Usher & Pajares [2008]).

A recent study by Corcelles, Oliva, Castelló, and Milian (2015) sketches out a possible avenue of investigation. Following a path begun in other contexts by Melzer (2009) and Gardner and Nesi (2013), they set out to explore what rhetorical genres are used in several Spanish universities. Unlike the previous studies, however, they assess not only the curriculum and instructors' reports, but also students' own self-reported genre use, and even sample student texts, comparing the material side-by-side to see whether student and instructor perspectives match up. The present study follows a

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similar line of inquiry, and is designed to help improve writing instruction and support in social work and kindred disciplines, by analyzing comparative data on student and instructor perceptions of what students are writing (assignment genres), and what process activities they use or recommend. We argue that a clearer understanding of areas of agreement and slippage between students and instructors will empower social-work faculty and support specialists to assist students more effectively in developing their writing practices.

This study was part of a larger needs assessment conducted by an "in-house" writing resource center (WRC) at a large social work department at the University of Texas at Arlington, a large public university in the southern United States. In a series of survey questions, we assessed student and instructor perceptions of social-work assignment genres, process activities, and use of available support. We hypothesized that students and instructors do not 1.) understand their writing *assignments* the same way, or 2.) use or emphasize writing *process* activities (e.g. prewriting, outlining, etc.) in the same way or to the same extent.

Student Writing in Social Work

Long before the National Commission on Writing issued its landmark millennial reports (e.g. 2003, 2006) critiquing the education system in the US for its approach to writing, Simon and Soven (1989) had already issued a similar clarion call to the discipline of social work. Social-work departments, like most other professional disciplinary departments, educate their students to achieve licensures and enter a workplace devoted to client assistance and advocacy, a process that involves communication and critical-thinking tasks such as writing court reports, sending written advocacy requests, and preparing policy briefs for elected officials. Simon and Soven (1989) point out that the social-work discipline stands at the multi-axis crossroads between theory and praxis; academic and clinical identities; and between the social sciences and "harder" psychological and neurobiological sciences. That is, social work is an inherently interdisciplinary field, demanding uniquely complex critical-thinking and writing tasks from students and instructors alike, and creating distinctive "tacit expectations" (Elton, 2010) for "good" writing. Finally, students entering the social-work discipline come from diverse backgrounds, with varying understandings not only of what "good" writing is, but also of what a professional education in this field means.

The strong emphasis on communication and perceived student needs in instructional support have inspired some social-work administrators to provide resources beyond the composition course sequence and the university-wide writing center. Most follow a WID approach, partnering with English or other departments to make available a writing specialist to assist students directly, in a supporting role outside the classroom (see e.g. Kilgore, Cronley, & Amey, 2013; Alter and Adkins, 2001, 2006; Dolejs and Grant, 2000; and Kahn & Holody, 2012). Others follow a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) approach, emphasizing how social work instructors can better implement writing assignments through text selection (Opipari, 2010) or in-class workshops (Vourlekis & Hall, 2007). Some programs have created and studied social-work-specific writing courses within the curriculum (Luna, Horton, & Galin, 2014; Woody et al., 2014), while a few have opted for a comprehensive revision of their curriculum, addressing many factors simultaneously (Grise-Owens & Crum, 2012).

With the exception of Grise-Owens and Crum (2012), however, these interventions have largely adopted a skills-oriented model, assuming that writing proficiency consists of "basic skills" that should be transferable from one context to another, or they have followed an "acculturation" model where students must be taught to adhere to expectations within specific academic environments. Current scholarship in composition and transfer of learning out of the first-year composition (FYC) classroom has subjected both of these approaches to considerable critique, contending that writing is a contextualized, social act, not a set of "basic skills" (see e.g. Adler-Kassner, Clark, Robertson,

Taczak, & Yancy, 2017; Beaufort, 2007; Lindenman, 2015; Qualley, 2017), and that the acculturation model risks ignoring the interpenetration of various academic and nonacademic discourse communities on university campuses (Lea & Street, 2006). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that most of these interventions have shown limited improvements in instructor-assessed writing, and that the most methodologically rigorous evaluation of writing support—by Vourlekis and Hall (2007)—was not able to find statistically significant improvement, as assessed by a holistic rubric.

Rather than assuming that writing is a transparent term, with universally applicable skills, or even transparent acculturation processes, recent studies in genre theory and transfer of learning suggest that students may struggle with writing assignments because they and their instructors do not understand the act of writing the same way. Composition theorists from Swales (1990) to Devitt (2004) advance the now commonly-accepted thesis that the genre of a given assignment constitutes a mode of social action in a specific social context—a rhetorical genre—rather than a set of formal features. Wardle (2009) therefore contends that writing assignments, if removed from key features of audience and purpose, may become "mutt genres," assignments with some genre-like characteristics, but completed for the school-oriented purposes of demonstrating learning and earning grades, with no connection to the future (social) writing context. Students heavily acculturated to "doing school," as Beaufort (2007) puts it, may not be well-equipped to put their prior experiences with similar or different genres to work in upper-division discipline-specific courses.

Several broad quantitative studies across multiple universities in the U.S. (Melzer, 2009), U.K. (Gardner & Nesi, 2013), and Spain (Corcelles et al., 2015) have generally concluded that these universities ask students to complete a wide variety of genres, but only Corcelles et al. (2015) go farther, studying not only what assignments are offered, or what students recall, but comparing students' and instructors' accounts alongside examples of student writing and instructor assignments to assess what kind of writing assignments they really do. At the level of genre, the study found general agreement between students' and instructors' tallies of specific genres performed. But results also showed that most of the writing constituted the "school" genre of declamatory recall, even when assignment descriptions used other genre labels.

In terms of genre, the discipline of social work asks students to develop a very wide array of capabilities, a broad "genre repertoire," to use Devitt's (2004) term. As demonstrated in the two primary guidebooks for social work students and novice practitioners (Healy & Mulholland, 2007; Green & Simon, 2012), the social work discipline asks students to become proficient in three "metagenres" (Carter, 2007; Lindenman, 2015) or "genre sets" (see Devitt, 2004): one dedicated to reporting and improving social work practice with individual or community clients, with the goal of improving socio/cultural/economic status and an audience of peer practitioners; one dedicated to advocacy for policy change, for the benefit of disadvantaged groups and with an audience of those empowered to change policies; and one dedicated to empirical research in service of a broadly-framed social-justice agenda, with an audience of both practitioners and researchers. Students' interests and specialties may lead them to gravitate more toward one of the three areas, but all students are required to participate in all three of these genre sets.

Most of these rhetorical genres are not immediately familiar to new students, and do not match up exactly with their prior writing experiences. Given recent research in how students transfer prior learning experiences to new writing tasks (Beaufort, 2007; Blythe, 2017; Hayes, Ferris, & Whithaus, 2017; Lindenman, 2015; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011), it seems likely that some of students' challenges do not originate in "poor preparation" or "lack of acculturation," but rather a mismatch between what the students and the instructors believe students' writing is doing. In turn, students' understanding of tasks has been shown to have a strong influence on what they do to carry out those tasks (Negretti, 2012; Penrose, 1992; Solé, Miras, Castells, Espino, & Minguela, 2013).

Across WID and WAC research, a general consensus has emerged that expert writing involves a more "robust process" (Beaufort, 2007), accompanied by investment in the content of the communication and the surrounding discourse community (Artemeva, 2008). Composition scholars generally recommend emphasizing the social gesture—the rhetorical genre—of a writing assignment rather than its formal textual properties (see e.g. Driscoll, 2011, among many others). But studies on what students actually do in response to discipline-specific assignments have demonstrated that many students focus on (and request from instructors) rigid sets of rules about expected content, format, and grammar (Borglin & Fagerström, 2012; Lavelle, Smith, & O'Ryan, 2002; Lea & Street, 1998; Lingwall and Kuehn, 2013).

These "rules-based" approaches to writing assignments seem designed to facilitate a minimal process, involving few of the "robust" activities such as preparatory prewriting, outlining, multiple drafts, and engagement with other writers in revision activities. In turn, as Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) have suggested, this minimal process may be serving a minimal expenditure of effort, to attain immediate and often grade-related goals; as Lavelle et al. (2002) put it, students ask, "what do I have to do to get a grade?" (407). This instrumental approach should not, however, be treated as mere "lack of effort"; it is at least partly a product of the institutional context (see e.g. Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). The social-work degree, for instance, is often advertised as a salary-boosting and job-securing instrument, and progress toward it involves not only performing adequately as a full-time student, but also completing a professional internship—and many students also work at least part-time. An instrumental approach may therefore be simply a material and pragmatic matter of time-management—a possibility supported by Jani and Mellinger's (2016) small-scale qualitative follow-up to Vourlekis and Hall's (2007) intervention, which showed that students at their institution faced pressures from outside school, and wanted more and more writing support, and clearer rules to follow. To date, however, there have been no studies directly comparing students' reports of what process activities they use with instructors' reports of what kinds of process activities they regularly recommend, information that may allow insight into the relationship between students' and instructors' understanding of what students do by writing.

Current Study

Few of the studies available as of this writing have directly compared instructor and student perceptions of writing assignments and processes, and none have addressed the discipline of social work. The present study takes preliminary steps toward determining how—and how much—social-work students and instructors agree on the writing practices and supports they use and teach. Because there is as yet little literature in this area, we do not begin with a direct analysis of student writing. Rather, we aim to provide a descriptive "snapshot" of one large social-work program, by collecting cross-sectional self-report data that suggests further potential avenues for research and intervention. We hypothesize that students and instructors differ significantly in how they understand the writing assignments in which they are engaged, and how they use or recommend process activities to address those assignments.

Methods

Setting, Design, and Sample

The study was conducted as a part of a comprehensive needs-assessment at the University of Texas at Arlington, a large urban state university with a large social work program, and used a cross-sectional design. Upon securing university Institutional Review Board approval, surveys were distributed via school listservs to currently enrolled students (n = 1508 in Fall 2012) and

instructional faculty and staff (*n* = 50 part-time adjunct [not all teaching every semester], *n* = 5 full-time non-tenure-track, and *n* = 24 tenured or tenure-track faculty members). The surveys included consent forms, and all participants who did not affirm consent were removed from the data set. In order to maximize participation, the surveys were made available for a full semester (September through December, 2012), and two reminders were sent to students and instructors. A total of 62 instructors and 264 students accessed the survey.

Convenience sampling of all current students and instructors allowed for maximal number of responses, and was deemed the best approach. Response rates varied, but the sample demographics mirrored the overall enrollment in the program; the final student sample reached 244 (16.2% response rate). Table 1 lists student response rates by program as well as demographics; although the rates are generally low, the work of Shih and Fan (2009) suggests that they are within expected bounds for such distribution methods. Instructor results were comparable yielding a complete sample size of 44 (response rate of 50.6%). Again, Table 1 provides complete response rates by instructor group; the rates were highest among full-time faculty members (tenured, tenure-, and non-tenure-track), who also teach the most varied course-load.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Students (n=237-244)a.	**% (#)**
Male (vs. Female)	13.50 (33)
Race/Ethnicity	
• African American/Black • Caucasian/White • Hispanic/Latina/o • Other	• 24.20 (58) • 49.60 (119) • 18.80 (45) • 7.50 (18)
Rank	
• BSW • MSSW • PhD	• 19.8 (48) • 76.4 (185) • 3.7 (9)
Enrollment Status - Full Time (vs. Part Time)	66.9 (172)
Class Format	
• All in person • Mostly in person, some online • About half in person, half online • Mostly online, some in person • All online	• 32.8 (80) • 41.0 (100) • 13.9 (34) • 5.3 (13) • 7.0 (17)
Current GPA	

• A (3.7-4.0) • B (2.7-3.6) • C (1.7-2.6) • Other	• 51.7 (124) • 37.5 (90) • 3.3 (8) • 7.5 (18)
	M (S.D.)
Age (20-62)	33.70 (9.10)
Instructors (n=42)	
Rank	
• Adjunct or GTA • Practice faculty • Tenure-track • Tenured	• 54.80 (23) • 11.90 (5) • 11.90 (5) • 21.40 (9)
Years Teaching	
• Less than 5 years • 6-10 years • 11-20 years • More than 20 years	• 35.00 (14) • 22.50 (9) • 20.00 (8) • 22.50 (9)
Teaching Levels	
• BSW, MSSW, PhD • Across two levels • Across one level • Administrative	• 57.10 (24) • 33.40 (14) • 9.80 (4) • 4.80 (1)
Teaching Format	
• All in person • Mostly in person, some online • About half in person, half online • Mostly online, some in person • All online	• 52.40 (22) • 23.80 (10) • 9.50 (4) • 9.50 (4) • 4.80 (2)
Grant A grades more than 50% of the time b.	42.50 (17)

Note. a. n ranged from 237 for Age to 244 for Gender ; b. n=40.

Measures

The survey began with demographic data before proceeding to writing-related items. Student demographics included gender, race/ethnicity (Black / African American, White / Caucasian, Latina/o, and Other), age, program (BSW, MSSW, PhD), full- or part-time enrollment, format (in-person or online), and GPA (self-reported). More limited information was collected from instructors to preserve confidentiality. These data included rank (adjunct, graduate student, non-tenure-track, tenure-track, or tenured), teaching experience (a 4-item ordinal scale from less than five to more than 20 years), teaching format (in-person, online, or both), and grade distribution (whether the instructor grants each letter grade >50% of the time).

Following the demographics, the surveys collected a variety of data regarding students' and instructors' perceptions of student writing. Some of these data regarded overall assessments of writing quality and characteristics, and have already been analyzed elsewhere (see Cronley & Kilgore, 2016); only select data regarding writing attitudes, writing processes, assignments, and use of writing resources are reported and analyzed here.

Student attitudes and use of resources. Data on student and instructor attitudes toward writing were used to provide a context for the differences in process use and assignment perception. Students were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale (1 - Strongly disagree, 5 - Strongly agree) to three statements about their affective relationship with writing: a.) *Writing is one of my strengths* (writing strength), b.) *My social work classes assign a manageable amount of writing* (writing load manageability), and c.) *Compared to other "big" assignments like midterms and final exams, writing is very stressful* (writing stress). We treated the aggregate responses on writing strength, writing load manageability, and writing stress as though they were continuous variables with ascending numerical values. In addition, students were asked to rate how frequently they used the university writing center (UWC) on an ordinal scale as follows: At least once a month; A few times per semester; Once each semester; At least once during my [university] career; Never; I was not aware that this resource is available. A similar question addressing use of the school of social work's in-house writing resource coordinator (WRC) asked the question more simply, with a compressed timeline of responses, since that resource was only a year old at the time of the survey: *Have you used the SSW Writing Resources?* (Yes, more than once; Yes, once; No; I was not aware that this resource is available).

Instructor attitudes and basic practices. Instructors were asked questions about their teaching preparation, student interactions and practices in the classroom. To assess experience, instructors were asked, *To what extent do you think that you were prepared to teach writing?* (responses: Not at all; Maybe a little prepared, e.g. was a TA while a doctoral student; Somewhat prepared, e.g. took a pedagogy class at some point; Very prepared, e.g. took an excellent pedagogy class and had a good teaching mentor). To assess instructors' perspectives on students' initiative, instructors were asked to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale, the statement, *My students seem interested in seeking help with writing (from me or elsewhere)*. Instructors were also asked three questions about their instructional practice: a.) *How often do you tend to use class time to discuss writing skills?* (responses: Every time students turn in a formal assignment; At least several times each term; About once each term; Hardly ever; Never), b.) *How often have you referred students to the UWC?*, and c.) *How often have you referred students to the WRC?* (these two questions had the same responses: Many times each term; Several times each term; Only once or twice each term; Never; I was not aware that this resource is available).

Assignments. Questions on assignments were addressed in a multiple response format, modified for the target audience. For students, the initial question was, *What kinds of writing have you had, or are currently assigned, to complete for your Social Work classes or field placement? (select all that apply)*. For instructors, this question read, *Which of the following genres of writing do you tend to use in your*

class writing assignments (select all that apply). Again, both groups were offered the same list of responses: Exam essays; Research papers; Client assessments; Case notes; Applications for scholarships or programs; Grant applications; Program reports/evaluations; Informal in-class writing (not graded); In-class writing projects (graded); and Other (please specify). "Yes" responses for each assignment type, excluding *other*, were totaled to create a composite score of "assignment variety" with a potential range of 0-9. The average assignment variety composite score was 3.64 (*SD* = 1.93, Chronbach's α = 0.70).

The choice of labels here presented a challenge. As discussed above, genres in social work comprise more than simply the writing assignment, and not all assignments participate in the genre their label might suggest. However, in order to avoid devoting multiple questions or entire descriptive paragraphs to each genre entry, we decided to use the most common label given to each type of assignment in social work course syllabi, or a descriptive label (like exam essay) that would constitute a genre name students could be expected to recognize. The only label that proved problematic was "research paper," which was included with the full knowledge that some scholars do not consider it a genre (Davis & Shadle, 2000; Larson 1982), or have found its use to vary considerably across contexts (e.g. Melzer, 2009; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Schneider & Andre, 2005). However, since the present study addresses only a single discipline, and since numerous syllabi do use the label "research paper," we chose, like Carter (2007), to include it as an option.

Process. Questions on process were addressed in the same multiple-selection format. For students, the initial question asked, *When you write a paper for a Social-Work course or field placement, which of the following do you use? (check all that apply)*. For instructors, the initial question was, *Which of the following writing-related strategies do you regularly recommend or assign in your classes? (check all that apply)*. Both groups were offered the same list of responses: Note cards or a note file for organizing sources; Brainstorming, diagramming, or other pre-writing exercises; An outline; More than one rough draft; A second reader, to help edit or proofread; A consultation with the UWC; A consultation with the in-house WRC (or other tutor); A professional editing service (or any paid service); and Other (please specify). "Yes" responses for each process activity were totaled to create a composite "process-use" score. Since so few students and instructors used or recommended professional editors, that question was excluded from the process score as well as "other," yielding a potential range of 0-7. The average process composite score was 2.68 (*SD* = 1.40, Chronbach's α = .56).

Because we were interested in whether students and instructors tended to use specific *types* of processes, we also created a second categorical variable, Process Types, from the process response options. The following process activities were combined into the category, *prewriting*: Note cards or a note file for organizing sources; Brainstorming, diagramming, or other pre-writing exercises; An outline; and More than one rough draft. Another set of variables was combined into the category, *revising*: A second reader, to help edit or proofread; A consultation with the UWC; A consultation with the in-house WRC (or other tutor). The variable, Process Type, contained four possible values: 1). None (no process items); 2). Prewriting only (prewriting process activities only); 3). Revision only (revision process items only); and 4). Both prewriting and revision (both prewriting and revision process items).

Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 21. Missing data were not imputed due to the very small amount of missing data. Instead, they were treated with listwise deletion. Among the students, the maximum amount of missing data was 3% (*n*=7) for *Age*. Within the instructor data set, the maximum amount of missing data was 9% (*n*=4) for *Frequency of Recording A grades*. *T*-tests were used to compare

group means between students and instructors on the process and assignment variety composite variables. Each process and assignment item was examined separately using Chi-square tests as was the Process Type variable. Effect sizes for the associations between nominal- and ordinal-level variables were computed using Cramer's V, and the association between dichotomous- and interval-level variables were assessed using point bi-serial correlations. Similar procedures were used to test within-group differences among the student and instructor responses.

Results

Student and Instructor Perspectives on Writing

While 62.3% of students agreed with the statement, *Writing is a strength of mine*, and 79.0% agreed that *Writing in social work is manageable*, 52.9% also agreed with the statement that *writing is stressful*, as compared to other high-stakes assignment types such as exams or oral presentations (see Table 2 for complete data). In terms of use of writing resources, 70.9% of students had never used the UWC and nearly as many had never used the in-house WRC (65.2%). While only 3.7% reported never having heard about the UWC, 13.1% reported never hearing about the in-house WRC (see Table 3).

Table 2. Student Attitudes Toward Writing

	Writing is a Strength (n=244)	Writing is Manageable (n=243)	Writing is Stressful (n=244)
Disagree	18.90% (n=46)	7.80% (n=19)	29.80% (n=72)
Neutral	18.90% (n=46)	13.20% (n=32)	16.90% (n=41)
Agree	62.30% (n=152)	79.00% (n=192)	53.30% (n=129)

Table 3. Student Frequency of Using Writing Resources

UWC (n=241)	% (#)
At least once a month	3.32 (8)
A few times each semester	2.50 (6)
Once each semester	4.60 (11)
At least once in my university career	14.10 (34)
Never	71.80 (173)
Not aware of the UWC	3.70 (9)
WRC (n=242)	% (#)

More than once	12.00 (29)
Once	9.10 (22)
Never	65.70 (159)
Not aware of the WRC	13.20 (32)

Less than half of the instructors (40%) reported that they received formal instruction on how to teach writing (see Table 4). They were more evenly divided about the extent to which they see students seeking help for writing, with just under 40% disagreeing with the statement that students take such initiative, and about 30% neutral or agreeing with the statement. The majority of instructors reported devoting some class time each semester to teaching writing, as well as referring students to the UWC and the WRC. Surprisingly, though, just over a quarter (25.6%) reported never having referred students to or not being aware of the WRC.

Table 4. Instructor Self-report on Writing Preparation and Instruction

	% (#)
Prepared to teach writing (n=42)	
Not prepared	28.60 (12)
Somewhat prepared	33.30 (14)
Formally prepared	38.10 (16)
Students seek help for writing (n=43)	
Disagree	37.20 (16)
Neutral	30.20 (13)
Agree	32.60 (14)
Frequency of using class time for writing instruction (n=43)	
At least several times a semester	30.20 (13)
About once a semester	51.20 (22)
Hardly ever/never	18.60 (8)
Frequency of referring students to the UWC (n=42)	
At least several times a semester	40.50 (17)
About once a semester	47.60 (20)
Hardly ever/never	11.90 (5)

Frequency of referring students to the SSW WRC (n=43)	
At least several times a semester	39.50 (17)
About once a semester	34.90 (15)
Never/unaware of this resource	25.60 (11)

Assignments: Differences Between Students and Instructors

As in the case of process elements, we aggregated assignment-reporting into a numerical "assignment variety" variable, with a maximum value of nine. Overall, students reported having received a slightly greater variety of writing assignments compared to the number of different types of assignments instructors reported using (see Table 5). When we examined the differences between the two groups by each assignment type separately, results showed statistically significant differences on three assignments: research papers, case notes, and grant applications. More students reported completing "research papers" (88.5%) than faculty reported assigning them (65.9%; $\chi^2[1]= 38.95$; $p < .01$). A similar pattern was observed with case notes (33.1% versus 6.1%; $\chi^2[1]= 7.41$; $p < .01$) and program evaluations (33.1% versus 19.4%; $\chi^2 [1]= 4.43$; $p < .05$).

Table 5. Variety of Writing Assignments Received/Used (n=288)

	Students	Instructors	***t***	Point Bi-serial
Average number of assignments received/used (s.d.)	3.61 (2.05)	3.23 (1.40)	1.56	0.07
	% (#)		**χ^2**	Cramer's V
Exam Essays	36.6 (94)	29.0 (18)	1.25	0.06
Research Papers [a]	84.0 (216)	46.8 (29)	38.95	0.35
Client Assessments	58.0 (149)	6.1 (10)	7.41	0.05
Case Notes [a]	33.0 (87)	6.1 (10)	7.41	0.15
Academic Applications [c]	16.7 (43)	0.0 (0)	---	0.19
Grant Applications [c]	10.1 (26)	6.5 (4)	---	0.05
Program Evaluations [b]	33.1 (85)	19.4 (12)	4.43	0.12
In-class Writing (not graded)	32.3 (83)	27.4 (17)	0.55	0.04
In-class Writing (graded)	38.5 (99)	32.3 (20)	0.84	0.05

Note. [a] Difference significant at p <.01; [b] Difference significant at p <.05; [c] Statistical test not computed due to insufficient cell sizes.

Writing Process: Differences between Students and Instructors

On the whole, the aggregate results suggested that students (M = 2.29, SD = 1.40) might use significantly fewer process elements than instructors recommend (M = 3.91, SD = 1.58; t[286]= 7.18, p < .01; see Table 6). However, when we examined the differences between students and instructors with regard to specific process elements (e.g., the differences between students' and instructors' reports of using or assigning "outlines"), we found that much of this apparent difference in the aggregate score was due to large differences in only a few process elements. A significantly smaller percentage of students reported having used the UWC or WRC, compared to the percentage of instructors who recommended these writing-support resources (7.4% versus 61.3% for the UWC [χ^2= 98.87, p < .01] and 6.6% compared to 56.5% for the WRC [χ^2(1)= 90.93, p < .01]). This sizeable difference was responsible for the appearance, in the aggregate, that students used fewer process elements. In contrast, a significantly higher percentage of students reported using rough drafts (43.6% versus 29.0%; t = 4.38, p < .05) and a peer reader (52.1% versus 33.9%; χ^2[1] = 6.67, p < .01) than faculty reported recommending these activities; effects sizes for both exceeded .50.

Table 6. Writing Process Elements Used or Recommended (n=288)

	Students	Instructors	***t***	Point Bi-serial
Average number of process elements used/recommended (s.d.)	2.29 (1.34)	3.91 (1.58)	7.18 [b]	0.39
	% (#)		**X²**	Cramer's V
Note Cards	10.1 (26)	12.9 (8)	0.41	0.04
Prewriting/Brainstorming	38.9 (100)	25.8 (16)	3.71	0.11
Outlining	58.4 (150)	58.1 (36)	0.00	0.00
Rough Drafts [a]	43.6 (112)	29.0 (18)	4.38	0.12
Peer Reader [b]	52.1 (134)	33.9 (21)	6.67	0.14
UWC [b]	7.4 (19)	61.3 (38)	98.87	0.58
WRC [b]	6.6 (17)	56.5 (35)	90.93	0.53
Professional Editing Service [c]	1.2 (3)	4.8 (3)	---	0.11

Note. [a] Differences between students and instructors significant at p <.05; [b] Difference significant at p <.01; [c] Statistical test not computed due to insufficient cell sizes.

When the process elements were divided into types (prewriting, revision, or both) just over half of students (52%) use at least one prewriting and one revision activity (see Table 7). An overwhelming majority of instructors (84.1%), however, recommended both process types (see Table 6). The effect of the difference between students and instructors regarding process types was moderate and statistically significant (Cramer's V = .25).

Table 7. Process Use by Type (n=288)

	Students	Instructors	X^2	Cramer's V
	% (#)			
No process	6.1 (15)	2.3 (1)	18.10	0.25
Prewriting only	21.7 (53)	0.0 (0)	---	---
Revision only	20.1 (49)	13.6 (6)	---	---
Both prewriting and revision	52.0 (127)	84.1 (37)	---	---

Within-Group Differences

To ensure against biases in the data-collection process, we also tested for within-group differences among students and instructors. Due to the small number of instructor responses, no significant findings could be determined. Among students, within-group analyses did not show significant differences on the basis of gender, self-reported race, or, for the most part, students' self-reported GPA, status (undergraduate or graduate), or format (online or in-person; full- or part-time). Full-time students did average higher overall process-scores (at 2.42) than part-time students (2.01; $t[242] = -2.37$ $p = .019$), and more full-time students did report completing case-note and scholarly application assignments than part-time students (case notes: PT = 25.3%, FT = 40.6%; $\chi^2[1] = 5.44$, $p = .02$, phi = -.149; applications: PT = 8.9%, FT = 21.8%; $\chi^2[1] = 6.18$, $p = .013$, phi = -.159). More in-person students (92.2%) reported completing "research papers" than online students (78.1%; $\chi^2[1] = 9.24$, $p < .01$; phi = .195). Likewise, more MSW students (91.4%) reported completing "research papers" than BSW students (77.1%; $\chi^2[1] = 7.57$, $p < .01$; phi = -.180). Effect-sizes were generally small, however.

Discussion

We undertook the current study to test the level of agreement in perceptions of academic writing among social-work students and instructors, in order to better define the challenges faced by instructors and other writing-support specialists. To begin with, our study produced results that differ from those found by Corcelles et al. (2015). Whereas they found overall agreement between students and instructors in terms of genre variety, it seems that students and instructors in our study differ in how they understand and label their writing experiences. Students over-report completing the generically termed "research paper," as compared to instructor reports, and the same is true of "case notes" and "program evaluations." Differences in course program (for students) and in specialty (among instructors) may have biased these results somewhat, but within-group differences were not significant, so cohort-based bias seems unlikely. Rather, it seems likely that both students and instructors have used the label "research paper" to describe writing that might actually belong in a different genre category. This is not the traditional problem with the pseudo-genre of the

academic library-report assignment described by Larson (1982) and revisited by Davis and Shadle (2000), or the issue with "mutt genres" proposed by Wardle (2009). In the WRC's anecdotal experience, instructors seem to regard "research papers" as *any* writing activity involving library or empirical research, and use the label concurrently with other genre names. For instance, some instructors regard policy analyses and case studies—genres from the very different genre sets of advocacy and practice, as "research papers." Given that students often see genre in terms of labels and formal requirements (Bastian, 2010), it seems likely that the appearance of the "research paper" label in multiple classes has primed students to notice and identify it as a "genre," even though their actual writing assignments may have been more different than similar.

The differences with regard to case notes and program evaluations point to different issues. The program evaluation constitutes a very specialized genre, involving the empirical assessment of a social service provider. Although most social work students should be expected to complete one during their degree process, the genre usually appears only once in the standard course-sequence for both graduate and undergraduate students. This means that few faculty should be expected to teach the genre, likely accounting for the difference. The issue with case notes is more troubling, as this is a "standard" genre across the varying realms of social work practice, and the cornerstone of the "practice" meta-genre—an activity that should be expected to appear in numerous settings (see e.g. Conroy, 2012; Sormanti, 2012). The pattern here, however, suggests a situation similar to the program evaluation: only a few instructors are teaching this genre, and students might meet it only once in the course of their curricular experience. This may be due to a division of labor in social-work degree programs not always present in other professional programs. Students learn academic tasks in the classroom, but they also learn a great deal in their field-placements, required internships supervised by practicing professionals outside the university. Although further research is needed, the results here may indicate that this genre of writing has been relegated to the field-placement context—in much the same way, in fact, that instructors regard the general realm of "writing skills."

As hypothesized, students and instructors differed significantly in their understanding of writing process activities. Broad underuse of process elements and prevalence of stress among students suggest that, faced with frequent high-stakes deadlines, students tend to see writing more as an evaluated product than a learning-oriented process, much as Beaufort (2007), Devitt (2004), and Wardle (2009) predict—and therefore the students in this study may engage in a "competitive" approach to writing, aimed at attaining course and degree-plan grade goals (see Lavelle et al., 2002; Pittam, Elander, Lusher, Fox, & Payne, 2009). Student attitudes toward writing also suggest that they nonetheless perceive it as a manageable activity, even one of their academic strengths. Although it might be expected that students' grade performance, age, program (BSW or MSSW), race/ethnicity, or gender should influence their experiences, no such conclusions could be substantiated in the present data; within-group differences were, on the whole, not statistically significant, suggesting also minimal cohort effects. Rather, the findings reported here suggest that the differences between students' and instructors' perceptions about assignment genres and writing activities lead to some of the challenges students face in meeting instructors' expectations.

In this light, perhaps one of the most surprising findings to emerge from this study was the fact that the students appear to use a greater variety of process activities than instructors report recommending. Instructors overwhelmingly favor referrals to extracurricular resources: nearly 90% of instructors reported that they have referred students to some writing support services on campus (the UWC or the WRC) at least once per semester—but instructors recommend rough drafts and peer readers less than students report using them. In treating writing as an extracurricular matter, instructors may unintentionally *reinforce* the more minimal-process, unreflective approach adopted by students more concerned with getting a grade than with attaining deeper learning. They may also undermine the students' ability to understand the widely varying rhetorical genres in the social work

repertoire—studies by Reiff and Bawarshi (2011), Artemeva (2008), and Lindenman (2015) suggest that instructors need to help students explore genre-specific rhetorical situations explicitly in order to facilitate transfer of learning.

The difference also helps to explain why students mostly do not use the extracurricular resources that instructors so commonly recommend. More than half of the students reported a GPA between 3.7 and 4.0, and concomitantly, 42% of instructors reported recording A grades *more than 50% of the time*. In part, this feature of the population results from the composition of the sample and the social work program's policies. Over 80% of participants were graduate students (at the master's or doctoral level), and at the time of the survey these programs required that students maintain a cumulative 3.3 GPA—and those with scholarship funding had even steeper requirements. As a result, those still in the program were likely to be those with higher cumulative GPA—and there may have been a certain amount of bias in the survey process (see limitations, below). Pressures to recruit and retain students may also have contributed to grade inflation among instructors. If, therefore, students are getting the grades they want, then it should not be surprising that students do not implement time-consuming "robust" processes. Furthermore, over 60% of students reported that writing was one of their strengths, a perception that would further discourage use of the UWC or WRC.

Finally, even though over 50% of instructors reported using class time for writing instruction at least once per semester, their reports on process elements suggests that they are not using this time to teach or recommend process activities—and furthermore, assignment data show that nearly half of the instructors surveyed (19, 43.2%) indicated that they do not use any in-class writing assignments. These findings suggest that instructors view writing as a task that students should master in and through work with assignments and support services outside of the classroom. These conclusions should not be interpreted as a criticism of individual instructors, but rather a critique of their prior preparation. Only 38.1% (16) of instructors reported formal training to teach social work writing, while another 14, 33.1% (14) reported being "somewhat" prepared, and 28.6% (12) reported being "not prepared." It should therefore come as no surprise if, by and large, instructors are not aware of the current "best practices" in writing instruction.

Limitations

An exploratory study such as this one, with a relatively small sample, cannot be generalized broadly. Social work maintains a strong social-justice mandate that attracts students from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom may have faced substantial disadvantages in their pre-collegiate education, or developed writing strategies to address very different social contexts. Their challenges with writing may differ substantially from students in the traditional undergraduate composition course or, say, an upper-division philosophy course. One must be cautious is generalizing results to other social-work programs as well, due to the small sample size, and low response rate—the high average cumulative GPA may indicate a certain amount of participation bias. In addition, if we are correct in identifying problems with definitions and perceptions of rhetorical genres, in particular, then these problems may already have biased these responses in ways for which the present study's design does not account—but again, within-group effects did not indicate cohort-based biases. Future studies might explore students' and instructors' perceptions of genre more directly, and in more detail. In the same vein, there are limits to what a quantitative self-report study can tell us about students' experiences. Future qualitative research should explore social work students' experiences in more depth, perhaps by following students longitudinally, through their process from admission to degree, or by collecting students' retrospective accounts of their experiences with writing as they approach graduation. A comprehensive review of the curriculum, already in progress at our institution, should also be able to show in more detail what kinds of assignments are being used, and how they position students and instructors within the social work rhetorical context.

Conclusions and Implications

Although limited by its size and sampling, the present study offers preliminary conclusions to guide further research on how to improve writing instruction and support for professional social-science disciplines like social work. Students and instructors surveyed here differ significantly in their perceptions of writing assignments and processes activities, and both groups' attitudes and practices seem to embrace an older model of genre labeling and approach, conducive to assigning and writing "mutt" (Wardle, 2009) or "school genres" (Beaufort, 2007), with the goal of achieving or reporting a grade. Understood from an "academic literacies" perspective, these factors may be related to the institutional context of practice-oriented programs, which combine, on the one hand, distinctive interdisciplinary learning environments requiring adept negotiation of writers' roles and, on the other, a strongly goal-oriented degree process, with tacit expectations for high-stakes evaluative (rather than formative) feedback on writing, and for an education aimed at career achievement.

For support specialists (WID, WAC, or UWC directors), these results suggest several possible directions for improvement. First and foremost, to minimize the expectation gap between students and instructors, our findings support Thompson and colleagues' (2009) recommendation that any support staff should have expertise in the students' content area, as well as the shared recommendation among composition researchers that issues of rhetorical (not just formal) genre be addressed explicitly and specifically. Given the gap between instructor and student perceptions illustrated here, training for support staff should emphasize discipline-specific expectations. At our university, the department's in-house writing resources office has begun to offer such training to staff in the UWC, but the process is ongoing, and has not yet been completed or evaluated.

Secondly, for instructors, early process or scaffolding assignments, when used well, can help prepare students for larger projects. As shown in our results, instructors do not assign lower-stakes in-class work or recommend process activities as pervasively as they might; the ongoing assumption that "writing skills" are separate from and more basic than "social-work skills" must be addressed. If anything, our findings suggest that scholars in rhetorical genre studies are correct that the social contexts for writing activities matter, and should play a strong role in classroom instruction—confirming recommendations from all recent studies on social work students' writing (Jani & Mellinger, 2016; Jin, Warrener, Alhassan, & Jones, 2016; Luna et al., 2014; Woody et al., 2014). The field-placement internships required of social-work students present a unique opportunity to integrate writing assignments with the social contexts in which their genres will become meaningful, but, like the separation of writing and other social work skills, they remain largely segregated from most students' classroom experiences. In our institution, for instance, only undergraduate students are required to do any significant writing in their field courses, and this only in a single semester. This is an issue mentioned as long ago as Jarman-Rohde, McFall, Kolar, and Strom's (1997) work on students' writing needs in field education, and reinforced recently in Conroy's (2012) guidebook chapter surveying field genres. In the long term, faculty and support specialists may need to provide curricular reorientation toward a less instrumental or "school-oriented" and more social approach to writing.

For administrators and departmental or university leadership, these conclusions also suggest several avenues that could be explored further. Our study agrees with Woody et al.'s (2014) conclusion that more preparation in discipline-specific writing instruction seems desirable, particularly for instructors who bear heavy teaching loads (usually full-time, non-tenure-track faculty), and particularly in universities that, like ours, lack a campus-wide WAC specialist or office. Secondly, if students enter undergraduate and graduate programs with perceptions of writing processes and tasks that differ from discipline-specific genres, then program leaders should be aware of how non-educational materials—such as marketing campaigns—shape these perceptions, and how

institutional goals also shape student experiences. Today's simultaneous emphasis on a customer-service orientation toward students *and* on increased enrollment, retention, and graduation goals can put contradictory pressures on instructors, possibly fueling grade inflation and cognitive dissonance (as indicated, here, by the high average student GPA, and the preponderance of instructors granting mostly A grades). Interdisciplinary partnerships like the one that led to this paper can come about organically, but are more likely to succeed if augmented with strong leadership.

Future studies can amplify our findings by relating the observed discrepancies more directly to instructional environments, institutional practices, and longitudinal changes in perceptions and experience. Further qualitative research should pursue the question of students' evolving perceptions of writing in their coursework and professional experience; we need to know more about how social work students perceive and carry out their writing tasks, how they perceive their instructors' expectations about those tasks, and how they understand their own development as writers and potential change-agents within the discipline—issues of metacognition too complex to be managed in a quantitative study. Qualitative and longitudinal analyses of instructors' preparation to teach writing, their perceptions of students' work, and their own sense of past experiences might also prove rewarding.

In sum, this study offers a preliminary attempt to compare instructor and student perspectives in the social work discipline, and provides some evidence that interventions for writing must address the multiple parties involved: faculty, students, and the institutional contexts in which writing instruction occurs. If, as composition studies and interdisciplinary assessments have repeatedly suggested, writing is a social act, then the full range of participants in the system are all responsible for how well our graduates are prepared to transfer their learning and carry out the primary genres of communication beyond our institutions.

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Contact Information

Christopher D. Kilgore

Writing Resource Coordinator

School of Social Work

University of Texas at Arlington

211 S. Cooper Street

Arlington, TX 76019

Email: kilgorec@uta.edu

Courtney Cronley

Associate Professor

School of Social Work

University of Texas at Arlington

211 S. Cooper Street

Arlington, TX 76019

Email: cronley@uta.edu

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