Report from the Field

Considering the Anglo Model of Writing for the Development of Critical Thinking

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My Experiences of U.S. College-Level Writing

Given this paper's fit as a report from the field, it is indeed the case that I am reporting on my own experiences, as both a student and teacher of college-level composition. Thus, I do not claim that this experience can speak for others, but merely suggest that it might ring true for some, notably in terms of how they were taught, and how *they* have taught, college writing. However, we need also consider the claim by Fulkerson (2005) that composition has become a "less unified and more contentious discipline" (p. 654). This suggests that perhaps we should not expect composition pedagogy to be unified in the first instance and thus, there may well be multiple realities for its teaching, of which mine is just one.

Fulkerson referred to disagreement emerging at the time his article was published, arguably still relevant, regarding the need to teach students to write good essays, amidst multiple approaches to achieve this goal, part of, perhaps somewhat ironically stated by Fulkerson, "pedagogical diversity" (p. 655). Fulkerson provided one example consisting of critical/cultural studies, whose main objective was not necessarily improved writing, but liberation from dominant societal discourse, involving essays on subjects such as racism and homophobia, to name but a few. A potential issue Fulkerson identified is that courses based on this approach need not be placed in English departments, where composition is traditionally housed, and the pedagogic practice might involve more reading in place of prewriting exercises—this would appear to be against the ethos of some composition teachers, however. Moreover, there is arguably little time to teach composition per se, though essays are of course produced. Thus, there is a need for clarity: is the main goal writing or interpretation of culture (via the act of writing)?

Another issue is that many composition teachers, both full- and part-time, derive from different pedagogical backgrounds, and we need to consider that some composition teachers may not have been trained in this field at all. Indeed, Fulkerson acknowledged that, while he is a teacher of composition, it is a discipline for which he was not trained, but into which he has nonetheless "been inexorably drawn" (p. 654). Thus, composition may still be in need of clarity regarding not just its goals, but also how it is taught. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on this area in terms of the essay's thesis statement specifically. I should clarify that in this report, the term *thesis* refers to the main point as encapsulated in one's introduction, whereas *argument* refers to the way in which writers develop their specific focus within the essay's body, thus referring more to rhetorical structure.

The Anglo-American model of academic writing has long been recognized as the suggested norm for academic writers (Connor, 1996; Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Kaplan, 1966; Wolfe, 2011). Harwood and Hadley (2004) referred to the model as being part of "dominant academic discourse norms" (p. 356) and with the terminology of "Anglo-American" firmly in

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place, the assumption is that there is not only a shared language, but also a shared rhetorical structure between the two cultures.

Composition textbooks that I have used with my students in college-level writing classes tend to make it clear that an opinion should indeed be integral to the thesis statement. According to Wyrick (2002), in *Steps to Writing Well*, "a good thesis states the writer's clearly defined opinion on some subject. You must tell your reader what you think. Don't dodge the issue; present your opinion specifically and precisely" (p. 33). Oshima and Hogue (2006), in *Writing Academic English*, stated that a thesis should not involve "a simple announcement" (p. 67), a point with which Wyrick concurred, saying that a thesis should avoid being "merely an announcement of your subject matter or a description of your intentions. State an attitude toward the subject" (p. 237). Wyrick further declared that "the single most serious error is the 'so-what thesis'" (p. 229)—that without a point to make. Fulkerson (2005) also stated that "evidence indicates that treating writing as argumentation for a reader is widespread" (p. 672). Thus, the model below is the one which, for me, was *the* model for academic writing, both as a student (in my undergraduate work and in a graduate class focused on teaching writing) and as a teacher:

Intro – State one's opinion on the subject (i.e., as one's thesis)
Body – Support one's opinion and refute others
Conclusion – Restate one's opinion

This suggested American model is based not solely on the advice of textbooks, but also on what I had been taught, and how I was encouraged to teach writing in a graduate writing class. This structure was never questioned by fellow graduate students (who, like me, were preparing for a career in teaching composition) or teachers and certainly not by the writing textbooks themselves. Thus, it is what I had firmly planted in mind as the established model for academic writing classes.

My Teaching Experience in England

It was within this American framework that I approached the teaching of academic writing in an undergraduate program in England, beginning in the fall of 2003. However, despite my instruction that students need to reveal their opinions in their introductory thesis statements, and support them consistently throughout, the following structure was noted instead in students' essays:

Intro – State one's intentions regarding the subject
Body – Explore the subject from several sides
Conclusion – State one's opinion on the subject

The structure above suggests a more "organic" way of writing, one that shows how the students' opinions are arrived at by investigating the subject through background reading and consideration of different sides. In the United States, students' opinions on the subject are indeed *informed* opinions, also having been reached only by first researching the subject. The chief difference is that with the Anglo model, it is more explicit just how a student's central opinion has been reached. Based on this Anglo model of writing,[1] I have been forced to adjust my teaching of the thesis statement in order to meet British students'

expectations of the function of this specific sentence, expectations which are very different from my own. Arguably, this pedagogical adjustment might be welcome in the United States. As Olson (1999) stated, "our efforts to subvert such a tradition [i.e., one of overt argumentation, what Olson calls a 'rhetoric of assertion'] may well be worth sustaining" (p. 9).

If we consider the American and Anglo models, specifically in terms of the starting point (i.e., the thesis), then there might be issues with regard to the appropriateness of each, when viewed through a different cultural lens.

> American model: *Nature is a more compelling argument by which we acquire our first language.*
>
> Anglo model: *The purpose of this essay is to discuss nature and nurture, in order to determine which is a more compelling argument in acquiring our first language.*

The Anglo character of the thesis statement could be regarded as the aforementioned "so-what" thesis (Wyrick, 2002). That is, the writer's opinion is missing and therefore, the thesis could be regarded as weak writing, or certainly unclear writing, in that it begs the question, "but what do you *think*?" In the British context, however, the writer has made his/her point clear enough—in this case, the purpose of the essay is to explore the relevant literature in order to finally reach a conclusion (i.e., an opinion). In short, the writer's central opinion is provided in the U.S. writing context (again, from my experience) as a point of departure, while in the British context, the writer's opinion is reached as a point of *arrival*. Thus, the conclusions in both models are also quite different in nature; the U.S. model reiterates the writer's opinion, and the Anglo model arrives at the central opinion for the first time—the difference being that with the Anglo model, we have seen precisely *how* the process of deliberation operates to form a final opinion:

> American model: *This essay has argued that nature is more compelling a theory regarding the means by which we acquire our first language.*
>
> Anglo model: *Having considered both arguments, I argue that nature is a more compelling theory regarding the means by which we acquire our first language.*

Criticisms of the American Model

The aforementioned American model, which has been my experience with college writing, has met with criticism, however. This criticism in turn is suggestive of a push toward what might otherwise be described as the Anglo model. For example, Olson (1999) addressed the nature of the American model as being, essentially, one-size-fits-all, based on a common way of teaching, which involves (or certainly has involved) taking a position and defending it throughout. Olson went on to say that "passages in an essay that do not support the position are judged irrelevant" (p. 9). Perhaps Olson's most telling point, on the same page, is that "the technology of assertion seems ubiquitous in composition studies." While Olson drew attention to alternative ways to address this fixation on argumentative writing, such as personal narratives, he conceded that this focus on argument is "entrenched" in students'

writing, presumably as a result of its historical entrenchment within composition circles, be they classroom- or textbook-based.

Kastely (1999) concurred with Olson, suggesting that by initiating an essay with one's central claim, "argument is not a mode of inquiry but a way of presenting conclusions that have been discovered prior to the argument" (p. 227). Kastely implied that rather than consider the subject at hand from multiple viewpoints—which is the structure of the Anglo model, in which the body of the essay accomplishes this goal—U.S. students put the cart before the horse, as it were, and begin with their opinion. He further stated that "the serious engagement with alternative positions is limited to figuring out responses to counter gaps in one's support" and "alternative positions never emerge in their difference as making serious demands that the arguer rethink his or her position" (p. 223). However, this should not suggest that U.S. students have not considered both sides of the coin before presenting their thesis. Indeed, it is precisely because they *have* considered the relevant literature on their essay's topic from different perspectives that they are then placed to arrive at their conclusion (i.e., opinion) in the first instance. Thus, Kastely seemed to be arguing for the need to make one's arrival at said opinion more transparent; how do students reach their opinions, as captured in the thesis statement, in the first instance?

The Anglo model makes this journey very clear, leaving the body of the essay to discuss differing sides of a given topic and using it as the means to reach a final conclusion, which is, of course, fittingly placed at the end of the essay. Thus, the Anglo model is comparatively more explicit in terms of revealing the critical thinking that is wholly needed in order to reach a well-reasoned conclusion in the first instance; this level of criticality is of course a staple of academic writing in the United States, but more on the level of supporting one's argument from the outset and refuting the opposition (again, from my experience). Yet Kastely implied that there is a lack of critical thinking in the American model precisely because there is a lack of consideration of opposing views in the body, whereas in the Anglo model students are expected to engage with a wide variety of literature, but strictly on the basis of seriously considering multiple viewpoints in order to then arrive at their final opinion.

College-Level Writing in Britain[2]

The term "argument" is used in Britain to refer to one's thesis statement, though it also refers more broadly to how one's discussion unfolds within the essay: "an arrangement of linguistic, visual and/or physical propositions in engagement with one or more other points of reference in order to change or assert a position" (Andrews, 2005, p. 267). Bonnett (2001) declared that "the ability to argue . . . is the core attribute of all forms of advanced level education" (p. 3), with Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson and Reddy (2006) claiming that "argument is arguably the defining feature of the essay" (p. 81).

To help one further understand the British university context, Table 1 provides a summary of relevant research (my emphasis in bold). Collectively, the research in the table suggests that delaying one's claim (i.e., a central opinion) until the conclusion is standard, with the introduction the slot to state one's intentions. It is also noteworthy that these studies analyzed academic writing from a variety of disciplines, but with the results suggestive of a more singular model of writing. The British preference for a delayed claim is again argued to be based on a means to explore and discuss the literature within the essay's

Table 1 *Research Results for British Academic Writing*

Researcher(s)	Nature of Study	Relevant comments regarding positioning of claim and/or overall essay structure
Kusel (1992)	Analysis of fifty undergraduate essays from five disciplines.	Thirty-two essay introductions outlined the essay's purposes or aims, involving "a short and explicit declaration of intentions" (p. 463); Kusel stated that **"indicating the purpose or aims of the topic was commonly chosen throughout [i.e., within the introduction paragraphs of the essays analyzed as a whole], but revealing the outcome this early in the essay was not popular**, perhaps because students would want to play this as a final card" (p. 463).
Read, Francis and Robson (2001)	Analysis of eighty-seven undergraduate essays from history students from four different London universities.	"Academic conventions such as **the need to evaluate a variety of views before coming to a conclusion [i.e., one's claim]**, or the need to reference other people's ideas, **are unproblematically seen as 'common sense' knowledge"** (p. 388).
McCune (2004)	Discussion of the essay writing process with first-year psychology students in Scotland.	McCune declared that competence in terms of writing conclusions involves **"developing an opinion . . . from the evidence included in the essay"** (p. 265). Indeed, McCune regarded **the most competent essay conclusions as being those which draw conclusions [i.e., claims] from evidence**—essentially, reaching an overall opinion about the material—the thesis statement—based on having discussed and debated the different theories and arguments within the literature first in the essay's body.

body first in order to make this process of having arrived at one's viewpoint more transparent. In other words, by merely stating one's intentions in the introduction, the body is left free not so much to support a claim, but to *find* a claim by discussing various viewpoints and exploring the process of discovery, with the conclusion (i.e., the final paragraph) then being the logical slot for the "arrived-at" claim to be made clear to the reader.

In addition, advice offered on British study skills websites states that the introduction should "*state the intention of the essay*" ("How to Structure," n.d., "Structuring Your Essay," para. 3); the introduction "*clearly sets out the aims of what you are about to write . . . state what the essay will try to achieve*" (The OE Blog, 2010, "How to Start an Essay," para. 1); the conclusion should "*draw a final decision or judgement about the issues you have been discussing*" (The OE Blog, 2010, "How to Finish Your Essay," para. 1). Most tellingly, according to Waylink English (n.d.), the introduction "*will probably be a statement of intent*" and the thesis statement "*will not express your own opinion*" (para. 3).

British students are not generally provided with a writing class at the college level. Instead, study skills websites, which should ideally be a supplement to established writing classes, function as a *substitute* for them. Accordingly, the students I have taught over the past fourteen years seem to understand a specific way of writing—explore, discuss and arrive at one's central claim. The ways in which this approach is relevant to critical thinking can be seen with an essay assessment I have set several times, in which students have to argue for the writing school they deem superior—product or process. Because they are expected to discuss the pros and cons of both schools, and not just support one within the essay's body, I believe that this has contributed to many students arguing that a combination of both schools is the ideal pedagogy.[3] In other words, by reflecting within their essay on the pros and cons of *both* sides, as opposed to leaving that consideration to prewriting exercises or discussion with classmates, it perhaps made it impractical to argue for one side only. Thus, I argue that this approach is reflective of a much more reasoned and nuanced essay, and one whose subject is more critically approached.

My Study of British Students' Writing

In order to further investigate my claim of an Anglo model of writing, I analyzed 535 student essays written in the 2010–2011 school year. Essays were drawn from 18 course units (four taught by me) across all three years of the academic program in which I teach. The essays were specifically analyzed for not only the nature of the thesis statement, but how this in turn affected the overall essay structure. The essays were largely 1500–2000 words in length, though some were longer, at 3000 words, and they comprised a variety of language- and education-related topics. In addition, five students responded to a questionnaire, which asked them what, if anything, they had been taught prior to university regarding academic writing. Though a low number of students, all responded by confirming that the expected essay structure pre-university was reflective of the Anglo model. One student summarized the structure thusly: "*Statement of intentions in the introduction, with the opinion in the conclusion*."

Of the essays, 56 would arguably not find favor in either the United States or Britain, given that they lacked any kind of thesis—opinion or intention-based—in the introduction. Instead, the students provided only background information on the subject in their introduction (but nonetheless provided their claim in the conclusion). Of the remaining essays, 274 displayed the Anglo model; 104 essays displayed the American model; and 101 displayed the American model, albeit with the opinion-based thesis statement in the introduction provided within a statement of intentions—perhaps a "hybrid" model. Thus, we have three specific models seen in the study:

> *American*—Process writing is the most effective school for developing students' essay skills.
>
> *Anglo*—The purpose of this essay is to discuss the writing schools, in order to determine which is most effective for developing students' essay skills.
>
> *Hybrid (?)*—In this essay I will argue that process writing is the most effective school for developing students' essay skills.

While the Anglo model dominated, the inclusion of the American model may seem unusual. However, this is not the case, given that the four courses I taught involved the students being told (yet again) to adapt their writing to the American model; most obeyed this directive. Without exception, it was within my classes that the American model, or at least the suggested hybrid model, dominated. For example, in one of my classes, Introduction to Academic Writing, first-year students had to write two assessed essays. Each essay adopted a two-draft approach, which in turn meant that the students had been reminded up to four times (at least!) in that class alone to write according to the American model. Little surprise perhaps that with each essay draft, more students gradually began to construct their essays with this model in mind.

However, what do we make of the suggested hybrid model? In the case of my students, might this be a way of resisting what might be regarded by some, despite my best efforts, as an unnatural way to write? That is, if for some students the presentation of one's central claim from the start is uncomfortable, then might providing it within a statement of intentions (i.e., *I will argue that . . . ; I will put forward the argument that . . . ; I shall be arguing that . . . ; I am going to argue that . . . .*) be regarded as a "safer" option, a hedge of sorts? Consider the fact that such common expressions (at least as uncovered in my study) point towards future action, suggestive again of something the writer will (eventually) get to/arrive at, with a thorough discussion of the literature to be simultaneously incorporated. Thus, the Anglo model is still being adhered to somewhat within this otherwise hybrid model.

Reflections of an Anglo Model in U.S. Writing Textbooks

Despite my experiences, U.S. writing research, even at the level of the college writing textbook, has nonetheless problematized the more argumentative-based approach. This approach subsequently is in line with the Anglo model described. For example, Harris (2007) discussed the nature of argumentation as one which does not seek to consistently oppose one view in order to consistently support another. Instead, he discussed *countering*, as opposed to refuting, as the means to discuss new ways forward on the basis of previous work. This allows for recognition of the value of a view that the writer is otherwise opposed to. Countering is suggestive of the Anglo model precisely because this model takes the time in the body of the essay to acknowledge the contributions of others—even to the extent of arguing the merits of opposing views—and in doing so, recognize the strengths, and not just weaknesses, of those viewpoints. This promotes critical thinking precisely because the structure essentially forces the students to ponder the subject from differing sides and arrive at a more reasoned conclusion as a result—an approach that is more thoughtful, objective and analytical.

Further, this rhetorical strategy in turn offers a solution, to an extent, to the problem raised by Kastely (1999) and Olson (1999), as well as others, who collectively argue for a writing approach that seeks to avoid certainty (Breuch, 2002; Harding, 1991; Lyotard, 1993) by abandoning the "rhetoric of assertion." Clearly, if a student is exploring both sides in an essay, then it stands to reason that he/she could not logically have what reads, ostensibly, as a pre-determined central opinion in the thesis slot; it belongs in the conclusion. As with Kastely, Harris, however, cited the practice of debates, which "tend to begin with their conclusions" (p. 57), arguing that this practice in the writing context is not reflective of a more reasoned and mature approach. Nonetheless, both Olson (1999) and Breuch (1999) strongly suggested that, despite this questioning of traditional approaches to writing,

pedagogic practice might still reflect the more assertive stance that is being argued against. This is where the Anglo model has an advantage. Ironically, while it is not discussed or theorized in Britain, to my best knowledge, certainly not to the extent writing is discussed or theorized in the United States, it is nonetheless a model that exists in *practice*, not just theoretical space.

Further, Booth, Colomb and Williams (2008) referred to the thesis as the "main point," but tellingly, they stated that this need not translate into an opinion-based claim per se. Indeed, they also discussed the possibility of a "point-last paper" (p. 242), in which the claim, perhaps an opinion based on one's discussion, is presented in the conclusion, thus echoing the work of Kusel (1992) in the British context of academic writing. This would also appear to reflect the Anglo model, but there is of course more to consider than just the thesis statement. Booth et al. (2008) went on to discuss the manner in which students should engage with the topic of the essay in the body. They exhorted writers to "consider issues from all sides" (p. 117), further explaining that one's essay "doesn't force a claim on anyone" (p. 106). This advice clearly goes against the more purposely argumentative essays that Kastely (1999) and others rally against, and more than this, the point is made that to create a sense of trust in the reader, writers must indeed develop their discussion in the manner described. Stotsky (1991) also referenced the need for students to realize that "responsible writers seek information on all points of view about a question" (p. 195). The key, however, is revealing this within the actual essay.

Rosenwasser and Stephen (2009) dealt more specifically with the nature of the thesis statement, as well as the preferred manner in which to develop one's discussion. While they stated that "a strong thesis makes a claim" (p. 193), *claim* is not synonymous with a one-way opinion. While they do reference a more explicitly argument-based thesis, it is not championed as the only model; they also described an analytical thesis. This is constructed by pitting one view against another, with the resulting discussion being anything but a one-sided argument.

Below is an illustration of three specific thesis types, all of which could be said, broadly, to have a claim:

> Argument-based thesis:
> Students should be taught using a product approach to writing, given the need for structure in one's essays.
>
> Analytical thesis:
> While process writing might be dismissed as too free in its approach, it can allow writers to develop at their own pace.
>
> Anglo model thesis:
> The purpose of this essay is to discuss process and product pedagogy, in order to determine which is more effective in helping students learn how to write essays.

Rosenwasser and Stephen (2009) pointed out the flaws with binary thinking, describing it as "reductive" (p. 73), and deemed it "dangerous to ignore the gray areas in between" (p. 74). This quotation is describing a need to engage with multiple sides of the

discussion, which leads not to championing one view at the expense of another, but instead "some compromise position between the claims of *X* and *Y*" (p. 165). This compromise position is seen with the previous example provided, in which students mostly came to a final conclusion that a combination of both product and process writing is an ideal solution. This kind of conclusion suggests that the approach taken to essay writing, which indeed revolves around a need to fully engage with different viewpoints, is realized precisely because the writer is not wedded to one side only. Thus, there is ample evidence that the argument for moving away from claims-based thesis statements, which lead to a focus on one side only, has been, and continues to be, addressed. The question, however, is to what extent this approach is practiced in U.S. writing classes. Might instructors, some of whom are part-time, or based full-time in literature departments, have very different experiences of writing, as students and teachers, which do not reflect the criticism explored here? If so, what are the implications for writing pedagogy in the United States?

Conclusion

My personal experiences as a student and teacher of college-level writing in the United States were quite uniform with regard to the expected nature of the thesis statement and subsequent essay structure. While I have emphasized that this is indeed *personal* experience, the literature suggests that, given the criticisms of an argument-based approach, my experiences might not be so personal after all. That is, the advocacy for a less assertive stance within writing would imply that the American model, as I have discussed it, has been, and might still be, the one taught to U.S. students. Thus, while the literature makes it clear that there are alternative thesis statements, structures and purposes to consider, it might be the case that classroom practice in the United States has not necessarily caught up with the theoretical discussion. It is for this reason that the Anglo model might be instructive. While this model is the one that is essentially discussed and advocated by several U.S. writing scholars, it is nonetheless the case that it is a model that is actually in use in British academic writing. Therefore, it might be fruitful for U.S. researchers and educators to consider the Anglo model as a means to develop critical thinking skills in students' academic writing.

Notes

[1]I am not asserting an Anglo model of writing before I have provided further evidence for its existence; rather, I use the term throughout the paper (as well as "American model") merely for ease of reference.

[2]Here, "college" is being used in the American sense of the word (i.e., undergraduate-level work).

[3]Interestingly, when I assigned my British students an essay which had to argue for or against the character of Mr. Keating in the movie *Dead Poets Society* (1989), a student questioned why it had to be a one-sided argument only.

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