
Student Voices on Writing at Plymouth State College

Gathered and edited by Deborah Boyd, Chris Casco, Mary Cavallaro, Shelby Linton, Seihak Mao, James Morgan, and Joy Seymour. Presented by Dennise Bartelo and Mary-Lou Hinman.

Last year, Volume II of this Journal opened with a faculty "Voices" section culled from assessments of Writing Across the Curriculum at Plymouth. The Writing Task Force knew we should balance the faculty perceptions with a similar assessment of student attitudes, but how? During a Task Force meeting, someone suggested creating an I-Course that would teach students about WAC theory and ethnographic research.

After training, those students would complete an actual student assessment project, submitting a collaboratively written report to the WAC Task Force.

What follows are student voices from that completed assessment report. Students in the I-Course, "Field Research in Writing," wrote the questions, conducted the interviews of one hundred Plymouth juniors and seniors, and analyzed the results of the interviews. The instructors acted as consultants, not censors. Some student comments were humorous. Others were downright disturbing to two women who have given their souls to the WAC program at Plymouth for the last eight years. But mostly the students' clear call for more writing was heartening.

We were encouraged by our work with the seven students who did graduate-level research for us in the undergraduate I-Course. All of

them—Seihak, James, Deb, Mary, Shelby, Chris, and Joy—developed a burning interest in their research and are now awaiting faculty response to their findings.

A few words of caution before you begin reading the student comments. One, the project assesses student *attitudes* toward writing at PSC and may or may not reflect exactly what is happening in the curriculum. Two, because ethnographic research is time-consuming, the students interviewed only one hundred students. Nonetheless, they were careful that their student sample reflected the makeup of the student body. Therefore, they interviewed more business and education students than philosophy students, for example. Third, the voices are authentic. Students were *very serious* about what they said. Listen to them.

—Dennise Bartelo and Mary-Lou Hinman

The following are excerpts from student interviews conducted during the fall of 1991:

Describe your current attitude toward writing in your courses. Has your attitude about writing changed during your years of study at PSC?

The student researchers were surprised by the positive attitudes of the majority of people interviewed:

I like to write. I feel more comfortable writing a longer paper than when I first came to Plymouth State.

My writing has become more precise and focused.

I enjoy it more, and the more I enjoy it, the better I do.

I think writing helps you. It helps when you share writing with the class.

At the beginning of the semester it seemed like a lot of work, but it

has gotten more enjoyable. My attitude has changed. I was worried at first about my spelling, but the more you do, the better you get at it.

I have no problem with [writing]. You need to do it so you can learn.

The few students who responded negatively to this question often linked their attitude to the *lack* of writing activities in their courses:

At the moment I'm not really doing any writing so I don't have a good attitude toward it.

I haven't really done all that much writing. . . .

Responses to this and subsequent questions revealed student understanding of the importance of writing skills in their future. A meteorology student said, "I need to write for the public." A business major commented, "I think students should be required to take more writing classes. Writing is something you're going to be doing for the rest of your life, so you need to do it well if you're going to succeed."

In what way has writing been part of the General Education Perspectives you have taken? In what way is writing part of your major?

Responses to these two questions varied depending upon the students' major and courses. Not surprisingly, students seem to write most in the humanities and education:

It seems like every class has a lot of writing.

I have had writing in world politics, all my French classes, and history classes.

Students who have written consistently during their four years at Plymouth felt that assignments had done more than sharpen writing

skills; writing assignments had helped them learn subject matter and “broaden [their] view of the subjects.” Nonetheless, a discouraging refrain surfaced in the responses of a number of students:

Mostly my writing has been in first-year composition and Intro to Literature.

The student researchers were clear in their assessment of student responses to these questions:

Overall, it seemed in majors that utilize writing techniques on a regular basis, the amount [of writing assigned] is adequate and helpful to the students. However, [some] disciplines do not [require] much writing. Integration of more writing in those disciplines [is needed].

What kind of writing has been assigned to evaluate your performance in various courses?

Topping the list of possibilities were essay tests (80%) and research papers (35%), followed closely by academic journals (33%).

Students showed a strong preference for essay tests over multiple choice examinations:

Essays are the best way to test; multiple choice is bogus.

I like essays better. They show what you know, [providing] different [avenues] to display the right answer.

At the same time, students voiced concern about having their grades determined exclusively by tests—essay or multiple choice—to the exclusion of other writing:

I write more on tests than day to day.

Some classes have no writing at all [except] essay questions on tests.

I don't get to show off my writing skills enough.

And many students found essay tests "stressful and difficult to write." They pointed to time constraints that make it difficult to write well without grammatical errors. One student advised, "Don't be so picky. Focus on the subject and don't grade on grammar."

Have you used the Reading/Writing Center? Why not? or What led you there? Describe your experience.

Of the students interviewed, sixty percent had not attended the Reading/Writing Center. Students often said they "didn't feel the need." But some said they "didn't know about it [or] thought it was for struggling students." Some thought the faculty "needs to make people more aware of it." Nonetheless, forty of the hundred students interviewed, referred by a composition teacher, friend, roommate, or advertisement, had attended the Center. Most commented that their experience had been positive:

It is a warm, friendly place, [and] helped to get things started.

The woman sat and brainstormed with me; she gave me ideas.

Only a handful of students were "not comfortable there."

What makes writing hard for you? What makes it easier?

Those faculty who have attended faculty training writing workshops will recognize these questions. It will not surprise you that what makes writing difficult for faculty, makes it difficult for our students as well:

— sitting down and actually getting started

— uninteresting topics

- mechanics
- lack of vocabulary
- poor research skills
- organizing thoughts in a coherent way

The student researchers found only two percent of the interviewees felt that negative feedback was inhibiting. Quite the contrary, most thought feedback from the professor—whether positive or negative—was crucial.

What other elements besides feedback made writing easier for students?

- specific guidelines for assignments
- more practice
- a good resource center like Lamson Library
- working with someone, having someone read your paper
- allowing ample time
- finding a quiet and isolated place to work

If you were giving advice to the professors at PSC about writing, what would you say?

Students emphasized the benefits of more one-to-one teacher/student interaction: “Active interest in student writing is important; just don’t assign a topic and collect a paper at the due date.”

The student researchers noted “the link between writing and thinking.”

One student told them, "You can go to class and 'veg,' but if you have to write, you are getting involved instead of just sitting there." Perhaps without understanding how their words echoed the theory of writing across the curriculum, students said, "Any department is responsible [for] teaching English and clarity [of expression]."

Other advice given to professors was remarkably concise:

- Tell exactly what you expect.
- Prepare sample papers and handouts.
- Leave topic choice up to the student, and do not require a specific length.
- Concentrate on quality, not quantity.
- Keep subject matter interesting.

Some students asked for fewer term papers and more writing throughout the semester. If term projects are given, students suggested periodic checks throughout the semester. As the researchers noted,

The students advise their professors to recognize the value of journals, the collegiality of collaborative writing, and the benefits of presentations and research. They want to be presented with more interesting topics and need to have a clear understanding of what is expected of them."

What piece of writing done at PSC are you most proud of?

In response to this question, one wag reported he was most proud of his roommate's paper which had cadged him an "A" when he submitted it as his own work. Mostly, however, students pointed to a piece of writing which gave them pride of authorship, but not always for the same reasons:

- The paper had received an A.
- The essay related personal experience.
- The subject was interesting.
- The assignment was long and difficult and had pushed them to work hard.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Asked for further comments, only one student said that too much writing was monotonous. Most, in fact, begged for more writing which interests them. The researchers were haunted by one comment that, although more negative than most, echoed some students' apprehension about their writing skills as they leave Plymouth:

PSC has allowed me to find myself scared to death to leave, scared to death that I won't know how to write professionally. I am still not confident about writing four years later. There needs to be more writing.

This cry takes us full circle to the opening question. Students who are leaving Plymouth confident of their skills clearly told us why:

I enjoy [writing] more and the more I enjoy it, the better I do.

You need to [write] so you can learn.

Somewhere between these two camps lie the majority of students at Plymouth State, which suggests we need increased rather than decreased emphasis on writing across the curriculum at this college.