Book Review of Aull, L. (2020). *How students write: A linguistic analysis*. The Modern Language Association of America.

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In her new book, *How Students Write: A Linguistic Analysis*, Laura Aull starts with a felt difficulty: why do first-year writing students adopt such a strong stance of epistemic certainty? As a writing program director, Aull found a puzzle embedded in this consistent pattern throughout first-year students' argumentative essays that she explores in this text. A stance (a rhetorical choice) of absolute certainty not only closes off dialogue, it doesn't match academic ideas about reasonableness and civility in writing. Aull argues that this particular student micro-pattern reflects macro-discourse conventions privileged by schools. Aull adapts genre theory to focus on institutional discourse patterns that are implicit in "good" academic writing and writing assignments in writing programs for two purposes: 1) to help students who do not come from privileged discourse communities better understand university writing expectations, and 2) to improve the civil qualities of student writing so that they can more robustly contribute to meaningful public dialogue.

1.0 Background

Aull points out that for historical reasons, writing instruction has been housed in English departments where writing is conceptualized as a humanistic endeavor, split off from a linguistics tradition conceptualized as a scientific endeavor. This has meant a methodological focus on ethnographic methods that look at writing contexts and whole texts, in part because of a rejection of positivist assumptions associated with empirical research and the social turn in humanities research. There is thus a methodological gap in writing instruction involving the use of empirical linguistic analysis using corpus methods (computer-assisted statistical analysis to discover language patterns in large text collections). Absent such methods, there is no way to detect the micro-features (hard to detect for human readers) which aggregate up to discourse patterns (easy to read for human readers).

2.0 Improving Methods, Improving Writing Instruction

Aull ultimately argues that if we want to understand how students write and thus improve writing instruction, writing instruction as a broad practice will need to use empirical methods from linguistics which scale and can make visible the discourse expectations in academic writing instruction. Aull structures this as a purely methodological problem: we are already doing human close reading at the top-level of themes and poetic/unusual language features. As Aull points out, we need to add computer-aided distant reading of very prosaic or widely distributed language choices to produce a robust, complementary set of methods that can interrogate multiple dimensions of student writing. In particular, this includes the relationship between micro-choices at the level of style/lexicogrammar, and how the choices student writers make meet (or do not meet) macro-level discourse conventions.

3.0 Understanding Student Writing

Aull uses distant and close reading to unpack three core qualities in student writing that reflect academic discourse conventions. That is, "good" academic writing for upper-level students balances out three qualities. The first is *civility*: principles of open-mindedness, engagement, and an academic reasonableness that opens dialogue rather than shutting it down. The second is *cohesion*: a repertoire of shared moves to create coherence across a text, helping lower cognitive burdens on the audience. Such attentiveness to the audience connects to civility. The third is *compression*: distinct from concision, this is the phrasally dense register of academic writing, where complex noun phrases are favored over many simpler independent and dependent phrase structures. This is in contrast to many everyday writing experiences for students and is in some ways at odds with the other qualities because it is so cognitively demanding of the audience.

4.0 Value Contribution

Aull offers a way of thinking about student writing that helps close a gap in writing instruction and aligns with *The Journal of Writing Analytics*' (*Analytics*) call for "research at the intersection of educational measurement, big data analysis, digital learning ecologies, and moral philosophy." The integration of distant reading into existing qualitative methodology common in composition research has implications for all of these intersecting lines of effort. Writing programs must be able to scalably analyze the micro-discourse patterns expected in institutional writing within a theoretical framework for understanding how these micro-patterns contribute to "good" student writing, in order to robustly inform educational measurement, build useful digital economies, and thus fulfil a moral imperative to make writing instruction effective for diverse student populations.

Beyond making a strong case for a new research agenda, *How Students Write* offers very practical help in the form of an afterword aimed at operationalizing these insights in classroom settings. Readers of *Analytics* who are new to writing analytics but want to implement this approach into their classroom practice will particularly benefit from this information.

The first half of this afterword is aimed at instructors, and offers a kind of explanatory typology of writing assignments that will be invaluable to instructors seeking to make writing conventions explicit to students. Additionally, having conceptual clarity about what different kinds of writing assignments do will be critically valuable for instructors seeking instructional coherence, linking learning activities to assessments and thence outcomes. The second half of the afterword is aimed at students, and gives them concepts and vocabulary for some of the most important discourse conventions they need to learn. Giving students access to these concepts with specific labels is incredibly important for scaffolding the learning of novice writers. It is one thing to tell writers they need to learn how to adopt a stance of intellectual openness. It is another thing to give them specific concepts like hedging and boosting, along with tabular examples of hedging and boosting, to craft an appropriate epistemic stance as a writer.

Finally, Aull also includes an appendix that will serve as an introduction and road map for using two foundational corpus methods in writing composition. For readers who don't have a background in the use of software or coding for language analytics, this appendix will be particularly valuable. Aull explains the use of parts of speech (POS) tagging to analyze grammatical moves (not prescriptive grammar) and keyness testing to analyze lexical choices, along with software suggestions for both. These are by no means the whole of writing analytics, but they offer a starting point for moving into practice.

This book is an especially important contribution in my view because it helps address issues of equity by improving the ability of writing instructors to diagnose and communicate how student writing matches discourse conventions. Lacking tools and vocabulary to detect and describe micro-patterns means instructors often resort to generalities: "this sounds too personal." Whereas, "I've marked first person and subjective experience language in your proposal—see how different that is in the winning proposals from last year . . . " directly links writing choices to outcomes. These insights are particularly beneficial for students less familiar with dominant discourse norms in academic settings. The methods and findings Aull shares can support programmatic and faculty effort in promoting equity through instruction. Thus, while all students will benefit from analytics-informed writing instruction, those most in need are likely to benefit the most.

Author Biography

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