Writing Across the Curriculum

Helping Graduate Students Improve Their Writing

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What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Writing is a knowledge-making activity: we figure out what we know by writing down our ideas: "It is through an attempt to find words for ourselves in which to express related ideas that we often discover what we think" (Gage, 1986: 24). Learning to write is a developmental process, which means that people learn to write over their lifetime. Someone might write publishable news or magazine articles but that doesn't mean they can therefore write publishable research articles. They will have to learn how to write the genre of research article before they can become expert.

Graduate students also must figure out how to write in the discourse of their disciplines. Kamler & Thomson (2006) emphasize that research is writing in academia. They note that learning to write is not simply acquiring "a discrete set of decontextualized skills" (5). Instead, they argue that writing is a social practice, and graduate students learning to write are becoming members of the disciplinary field in which they write. Consequently, helping graduate students learn to write in the discourse of their disciplines is not remedial but central to their development as scholars and of a scholarly identity (144). They also point out that "research writing" is a discipline-specific genre with "patterns and conventions that can be learned" but that also require graduate student writers to develop "discipline-specific scholarly identities" (12).

It is the role of supervisors, then, to act as guides and mentors to students because, as Kamler & Thomson note, "the supervisor embodies and mediates institutional and disciplinary cultures, conditions and conventions" (144). Of supervisors helping their students learn to write, Bazerman

(2009) explains that, although professors may write the genres of their disciplines successfully, they may lack "linguistic and rhetorical vocabulary and analytical methods" (289) that enable them to explain their strategies for success to the students they supervise. Consequently, as Paré (2010) notes, "supervisor feedback is often ambiguous, enigmatic, and coded—that is, saturated with meaning, but difficult to understand."

Paré suggests that supervisors should acknowledge their role in enculturating students into the discipline and teaching them the rules of membership as expressed through written texts by offering comments within this context. And once students understand their field as a dynamic series of discussions that are being negotiated using methods of argument particular to that field they may better understand supervisor comments as helping them position themselves within the ongoing discussion.

Four Suggestions For Supervisors:

1. Link comments to disciplinary conventions, rhetorical strategies, personal preference or some other justification: explain why something should be changed.

2. Explain to students how to situate their contribution in relation to the published literature and why this move is appropriate within your discipline.

3. Use commenting as a means to foreground assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and knowing in your discipline.

4. Include comments that help to socialize students into the rules of your discipline.

Kamler & Thomson (2006) note that helping graduate students learn to write is too large a job for individuals so they call for universities to "establish institutional writing cultures" (144) to support this important area of supervisors' work. They suggest four ways that institutions can build a culture of writing. Supervisor-initiated **reading and writing groups** can highlight disciplinary discourse conventions while students share and discuss important journal articles. The groups can look at such aspects as how an argument is sustained from chapter to chapter in a book or from section to section in a journal article; how section and subsection headings and the start and end of paragraphs move the argument ahead; or how authors signpost key ideas for readers.

Another strategy is to establish **writing-for-publication groups**. Kamler found that students who co-author with supervisors publish more and earlier in their programs because the collaborative writing teaches them "the ropes of academic publishing" (147). This type of group builds a support group for students' writing development that "break[s] down solitary and private approaches to academic work" (150). In the process, students learn "dialogue, reciprocity, respect for difference and enriched peer relationships" (150).

A third strategy is for supervisors to work collaboratively with academic support services. Some academic support offices offer **thesis-writing circles** structured as peer-writing groups that bring together sometimes- isolated students working on theses. These thesis-writing circles combine structured discussion of specific aspects of academic writing with opportunities for students to share drafts and discuss their thesis-writing experiences. Kamler & Thomson note that the success of this option depends on "frequent meetings, small numbers of participants, high levels of self-motivation and an expert facilitator" (153).

Four Ways For Supervisors To Build A Culture of Writing

1. Set up Supervisor-Initiated Reading/Writing groups. These groups discuss aspects of writing as well as theoretical or methodological issues associated with core texts valued by the group.

2. Establish Writing-for-Publication Groups. These groups create a space for students to support one another through the process of drafting a publishable manuscript.

3. Collaborate with academic support services at your institution. Create thesis-writing circles that discuss specific features of academic writing, provide opportunities for students to share drafts and thesis-writing experiences.

References

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