

Where Teachers and Students Meet: Exploring Perceptions in First-Year Composition

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Although scholars have examined undergraduate learning associated with Writing about Writing (WAW), there are no detailed studies of what students think, nor do we know how they perceive the differences between WAW and other, more traditional first-year writing courses. My study explores the connections between teachers' pedagogical choices in first-year writing courses and students' perceptions of learning in these courses. Through personal interviews with students and teachers, I examine how students perceive their own writing and how teachers perceive what their teaching methods can accomplish in first-year composition.

Writing about Writing (WAW) is a pedagogy recently developed to invite undergraduate students, particularly those in first-year composition (FYC), into scholarly conversations about writing. Students read scholarly texts on writing studies to develop a better understanding of their own writing and learning processes. The goal of the pedagogy is to help “students use writing studies scholarship to (re)construct knowledge about writing, writers, writing processes, discourse, textuality, and literacy [; therefore,] WAW aligns a writing course’s object of study—writing—with its read and written content, the research of the field of writing studies” (Downs). Undergraduates like myself learn different theories about writing and how these theories apply to our own learning experiences and practices. As Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle put it, WAW pedagogy aims to “demystify the myth” that writing is hard, so hard that only a select few can accomplish it. By asking students to read scholarly studies about the problems students have with writing, they argue, WAW pedagogy takes the “mysterious” idea of writing and puts it at the center of student learning in FYC.

This pedagogy gained a national audience with the 2007 publication of Downs and Wardle’s “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies.’” In their article, they explain why students’ experiences are central to this new approach. In a WAW classroom, students have the opportunity to discuss scholarly readings, coming closer to an understanding of what writing means to them and their learning. Students “avoid merely banking information”; instead, they “discuss, write about, and test every reading in light of their own experiences; they discuss why they are reading a piece and how it might influence their understanding of writing” (Downs and Wardle 561). Students are no longer working, as we so many times perceive it, to keep busy. In this pedagogy, students understand that each reading and writing assignment in WAW has a direct connection to them and that their writing activities have purpose.

Wardle and Downs advocate for an inquiry-driven research course. They claim that this

approach “allows students to take control of problem areas in their own writing when they focus on those problems directly in their research projects. Consequently, the course about writing becomes a *writing* course in which students study writing to learn more about it and potentially improve their own” (562). In developing their research questions and papers, students focus on improving their writing through expressing their personal interests. Using writing research as the content of the class and as the focus of student research is a reaction against the traditional FYW course, which may use any topic to teach writing. WAW courses emphasize student learning through writing and the development of a student’s writing process.

Besides Downs and Wardle’s introduction to the WAW approach, there aren’t many studies that explain WAW and what it can accomplish, and even fewer focus on students’ perspectives of this particular pedagogy. However, there is one particular study, written about my institution, that shares a perspective similar to my argument in the current article. In “Seeing Is Believing: Writing Studies with ‘Basic Writing’ Students,” Jonikka Charlton introduces the WAW program that the University of Texas–Pan American (UTPA) uses in its developmental basic writing classroom. UTPA currently serves approximately 18,000 students, and with 90% of those students identifying as Hispanic, UTPA is classified as a Hispanic serving institution (HSI). More than 90% of UTPA students come from our local area, the Rio Grande Valley, and almost 50% of these students are from the bottom half of their high school graduating class (Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness).

In her study, Charlton explains and then challenges the negative view of the abilities of developmental writing students at UTPA. Charlton contends that UTPA developmental writing students are more than capable of succeeding in a classroom using WAW pedagogy despite being considered “at-risk” students. UTPA students typically come from TAKS-focused high schools (the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills is a standardized testing system required of all public schools), meaning that most of their reading and writing experiences were centered on TAKS preparation, and thus student capabilities are *limited to* TAKS preparation. Although skeptics might challenge the introduction of WAW pedagogical principles to the teaching of freshmen, “particularly to *our* freshmen,” Charlton redesigned the developmental program at UTPA with WAW, offering students the opportunity to take Basic Writing (a noncredit course) and the first part of the two-part sequence of FYC at the same time. When students then moved on to the second course in the FYC sequence, Charlton noted that developmental students had better outcomes compared to “regular” students who hadn’t taken the developmental course in WAW (paragraph 16). As a student from a TAKS-focused high school, I could easily relate to Charlton’s arguments about WAW and its use in the curriculum. I had focused on writing narratives in response to the TAKS testing requirements, and when I found myself in a college writing classroom, I tried to make sense of my past experiences in high school in comparison to the setting I found myself in—a WAW curriculum.

Separate from the Basic Writing Program, UTPA’s First-Year Writing Program’s two-semester sequence does not have a standardized curriculum or recommended texts. The instructors teaching in the FYC program are usually a combination of tenured faculty, tenure-track faculty, lecturers, and part-time hires, and the focus of the curriculum is determined by who is teaching the course. The first part of this sequence is English 1301, where students have the opportunity to communicate through writing, work on the mechanical parts of writing a paper, and learn to organize their papers. In English 1302 students “learn to recognize and to employ the principles

of rhetoric in written discourse” (Department of English). Students analyze rhetoric and logic, and study scholarly texts about students in FYC much like themselves. The second-semester course also requires the students to develop a research question and complete a research paper. Although the program used in ENG 1301 and 1302 classrooms varies, the course goals, outcomes, and even means remain the same.

We don’t have detailed studies of what students think about the WAW curriculum, and we don’t know what they may or may not see as the differences between the WAW courses and other, more traditional FYC courses. Although Downs and Wardle have examined undergraduate learning associated with WAW, and Charlton has examined some student perceptions, this study seeks to find connections between the teacher’s pedagogy of choice in the FYC curriculum and the student’s perceptions of her/his learning. Through my investigation, I want to understand what role perception plays in learning—not only the perceptions the students have of their own writing but also the teachers’ perceptions of what their teaching methods can accomplish in FYC—and to learn how, if at all, WAW courses might affect these perceptions.

Researcher’s Position

As a researcher, I believe it is important to reveal my own position and assumptions in relation to my topic. As an undergraduate student at UPTA, I was enrolled in a WAW-oriented English course, English 1301, whose objectives are described above. The experiences in this pedagogy changed the way I looked at my writing and my learning; instead of developing writing skills through narrative essays on topics much like the ones seen in high school, discussing a time when I felt most accomplished, I was instead reading scholarly texts and developing research questions from my interests. This change in focus not only ultimately helped me to understand factors at play in my own writing, but substantially changed the way I perceived my own writing process. However, in classroom discussions with my peers, I realized that not everyone had these same experiences in FYC, so I set out to learn more about how WAW classes and non-WAW classes are perceived by students and teachers.

Methodology

I developed open-ended questions designed for interviews to obtain personal responses from teachers and students alike. The questions were designed to investigate teachers’ and students’ reactions to different teaching methods of FYC. I conducted four interviews face-to-face: two with professors, Jean Logan and Rebekah Smith, and two with students. The two professors were asked six questions, ranging in topic from their teaching methods to what they thought about WAW:

- Tell me what you think are the benefits of the writing assignments you give students. What should they learn about writing by completing this work?
- Tell me what you think are the benefits of how you teach writing. What should students discover about their writing process because of your teaching methods?
- Do you believe that students’ attitude towards their own writing, how they perceive writing, and what they believe to be the purpose of writing has an influence on what they can accomplish in your class?
- Could you tell me what you know about other professors’ teaching approaches in first-year writing courses? Can you describe any differences you see between

your methods and those of others here at UTPA?

- When you think about the difference in methods used in first-year writing courses, do you feel like different ways of teaching provide the same outcomes for students in terms of perceptions about their own writing?
- What can you tell me about the Writing about Writing program: What are your perceptions of this program? Do you use this program in your classroom? Why or why not?

From the instructors' answers to these questions, I anticipated learning what they believed students should get out of their class and how students would be able to meet the professors' teaching goals.

The two students I interviewed were asked four questions pertaining to the writing assignments they had completed and their attitudes towards writing:

- Describe the connection, if any, that you found between your assignments and your attitude towards your own writing.
- Can you please describe your favorite type of assignment in class—the ones that you could most relate to?
- If you had the choice of what learning program you were involved with in your class, tell me what you think you would choose. Would it be a setting like the one you were enrolled in? Did you know you had another option? If you could choose another program, why would you do so?
- Tell me what you think are the benefits of this type of English 1302 class. What did it mean for the way you perceived your own writing?

In the students' answers to these questions, I planned to see what they believed the pedagogy and class activities meant for them as learners and writers. I wanted to find what distinctions there were in their classroom settings as well as determine the outcomes they felt the class methods had on their attitude towards writing.

In formulating my research methods, I ruled out using a questionnaire because anonymous answers seem impersonal and more about numbers than responses. With my interviews, although the sample size was small, I received responses directly from the students and teachers. I wanted also to create a more relaxed setting, one where the participant could respond verbally rather than in writing, and thus would not have to worry about the length of a response or grammatical errors. Initially, I emailed notifications requesting a time to meet with professors and students. During the interviews I used a voice recorder to capture the responses verbatim. The information that I collected from the interviews was categorized by the methods used in class, perspectives of both teacher and student, outcomes of methods used, and any similarities between WAW and non-WAW. I divided up the results that involved WAW and the non-WAW to analyze differences in each interviewee's perspective about methods and outcomes. All interview subjects were able to review this article as it was being drafted and revised, and they have given written permission for me to include their answers to my questions in this essay.

Results

Writing about Writing Interviews

Thinking about Writing

Through my interviews with the two parties involved with WAW, the professor and the stu-

dent, I found that Jean Logan's student outcomes for WAW corresponded to what the WAW student felt she had accomplished. When I asked Logan about assignments in WAW compared to other programs, she argued that although some assignments outside of WAW may be well written, students might not learn how to transfer their experiences to other situations. Logan contended that she might not be able to help students if they are researching and writing in a subject in which she has no expertise. She pointed out that although in a non-WAW course students may produce a well-written personal essay and the course will address common concerns like grammar, punctuation, and style, it is not clear what students will come to understand about the writing process and how that information will transfer to another class. Most "FYC classes throughout the country allow students to write on any range of topics, topics which often fall outside the writing teachers' specialization" (Downs and Wardle 576). If the subject falls outside the teacher's knowledge, the teacher likely cannot help the students improve their writing. More importantly, as Logan explained, the student is learning content, not learning about writing processes: "Maybe you're going to write a very good paper because you are deeply interested in [the] dolphin brain, but it's not going to help you outside of the class. But if you're able to identify your writing process, how it works, it's going to help you more so. Hopefully you can transfer those skills everywhere." From Logan's perspective, if students are allowed to write about any topic, they cannot directly see how their writing process works and develops, especially when the professor cannot give the students a better understanding of this process because the topic itself is not writing.

When I asked the student enrolled in the WAW course what she felt was helpful about the assignments, she explained that she could see how they would ultimately benefit her. She understood her writing process better, and because of this, she was able to see how she could transfer this information into other types of learning: "One of the topics we dealt with was carrying the knowledge we gain from [our WAW course] to another class, although the knowledge is different to the other courses you take." This student's assessment echoes what Downs and Wardle report in their studies, as she "suggested that [she] thought a lot about [her] own writing by the end of this course" (572). In thinking deliberately about her own writing process and better understanding the way she learned through her writing, this student now believes she can easily incorporate her new knowledge into other applications. In this situation, the teacher's perceived goals and the student's perceived learning was commensurate.

Thinking about Attitudes

Logan saw one major shift in students' attitudes towards their writing assignments in her WAW courses: "A real purpose and a real result of your research. You can see your result of what you are writing about. . . . I think that if the student understands why they are doing their work and how the work can benefit them, the *attitude* can drastically improve." Even though the WAW student did find the assignments difficult, she understood that it was of value to her work. What I found most interesting was that at the beginning of the interview, the student stated how she hated the class because it involved so much work, but by the end of the interview, her responses didn't reflect any dislike for the class or the WAW program. When I pointed this out to her, she laughed and said, "I guess you're right." She finished her final question with this statement: "I wouldn't have changed a thing. Yes, it was hard at first but in the end each assignment had a *purpose* and they all connected beautifully." After reflecting on her experience in WAW, the students

became more aware of her learning outcomes through the course. For this student, the difficult WAW assignments were personal because, as she said, she was connecting her work in the class to future writing projects. The work seems to have required an internal understanding of what went into her writing; it had a personal purpose to her—one that she had to design. Her experience corresponded with Logan's perspective of what a student could accomplish in a WAW course; she could transfer what she learned about her writing process into other areas of learning because she was able to see the benefits in her work through the course.

Thinking about Reading

When talking about the reading assignments in WAW classes, Logan noted this attitude shift again, one from dislike to acceptance because there was a new purpose. As she explained, when WAW is first presented to the students, they tend not to react favorably. Students don't want to read articles, especially articles about writing. They don't want to do this reading because they believe that all they are going to do in the class is write. Logan reported that students often tell her, "Well, that's not what I want to read." She went on to explain that with class discussions students begin to see the value in reading about writing: "When you talk about [the concepts] with them and they write about it, I think at one point students understand the value of it."

When I asked the WAW student what she felt about reading the assigned articles, her response corresponded to what Logan had described: "At first, when you read the article[s], they pretty much just suck, and you really lose hope. I found the articles really complex. However, the professor I had made us just ask questions and pinpoint main ideas in the articles. It seemed like it wouldn't help, but if it wasn't for her making us read them, I probably wouldn't have had my last paper down." WAW, it seems, establishes a new purpose for writing and reading through its assignments and readings. More importantly, what professors expect and what students accomplish correspond. The perceptions about what should be learned and what is being learned match, suggesting what this approach to a FYC course can provide for students: a clearer understanding about their own writing and a purpose for writing, one that can extend outside their FYC classroom.

Non-Writing about Writing Interviews

Communication through Writing

When I decided to interview a professor using a non-WAW pedagogy, I was not aware how many different methods there are for teaching FYC. In this discovery, I realized that the responses I received from the student not involved in WAW and from Professor Rebekah Smith were not going to be directly comparable because the student hadn't taken Smith's class and thus was not exposed to her particular pedagogy. Despite this fact, I believe this aspect of my research still has value because the results nevertheless illuminate different experiences and perceptions in FYC.

Smith made the point that she expected students in her FYC courses to learn how to think critically and to effectively communicate their ideas through writing. One of her main goals is to provide students with better communication skills through writing: "Well, what [students] are learning about writing is how to codify critical thinking in such a way where they can communicate effectively through the written medium." She also explained that she is looking to empower her students: "Empowering my students means taking that whole big scary idea of a term paper and turning it into okay, it's work, we may never love writing, but they will be able to do it effec-

tively.” If her students do not feel a sense of empowerment, then, she explains, “I have not done my job.” Both writing professors talked about what they wanted their students to be able to do after completing the class, but Smith’s pedagogy is more focused on communication than Logan’s. She wants to make the idea of a term paper less scary, but, interestingly enough, this doesn’t seem connected to the students’ writing. What the students do and how they do it are separated more in Smith’s course because although they are practicing writing, the content of the course is not completely centered on writing.

External vs. Internal

Smith uses Writing about Policy (WAP) to teach her FYC rather than WAW. She compared the two methods in our interview: “One is more of an internal dissection, and one is external asking you to internalize. So when I talk about policy . . . we are giving a framework to write on much like the WAW. Although I don’t use that technique . . . I get my students to think about writing, but I don’t want them to completely obsess on the writing because there is a really big world out there that needs you guys to help fix it.” She explained that even though WAP is like WAW, in her perspective, WAP teaches students about the writing process while also getting them to think about real problems in the world. She further explained her belief that WAW can cause “an obsessive me-ism” in students, leading them to become “self-centric.” Because WAW asks students to think so much about themselves and their own writing processes, Smith was concerned that if she used the pedagogy she couldn’t achieve her two goals: wanting students to become good writers but also wanting them to make the world a better place.

WAP appears to be just that: writing about policy. The explanation about WAP provided by Smith is interesting. From her perspective, the FYC class should teach students not only how to communicate more effectively, but also how to solve global problems through writing. Using this method, students are or can be involved with real issues, but it seems unlikely that they would have a different perspective towards their writing processes at the end of this course because they’re not reading or writing about the practice of writing. This comparison between approaches raises interesting questions about what should happen in the FYC class. There are many problems in the world that need solving, and rhetorically based courses, like Smith’s WAP, can help students learn to engage publicly in those debates.

Writing about Self

Before I interviewed the student enrolled in a course that did not use WAW, I was convinced that she would tell me two things: one, that she was not aware of other programs; and two, that if given the chance, she would have chosen a class that would cover all of the things I found in WAW. To my surprise, she told me she would not have chosen a different setting from the one she experienced. In her English class, she was given writing assignments like personal essays and the more “traditional” style of assignments. She found that “creative writing brought out a more interested attitude” in her own writing. She felt that, freed from worry about facts, she could just express herself in her English class creatively and personally. She was not convinced that skills learned about writing in her English class “translated” to or helped in her other courses, admitting that she didn’t like writing.

Conclusion

I set out to understand how instructors and students perceive different pedagogies. I found that differences in their perceptions impacted what students were learning, especially in WAW courses. I learned that the WAW program is not the only program with the goals of increasing students' "rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; and knowledge of conventions" (Department of English). I set out to find contrasts in methods, ruling out the possibility of also finding some similarities. Although the programs may differ, as Logan explained, "I am sure that other approaches have their own benefits. That's why other professors are teaching them, I guess, because they see other benefits. It's not because we do not share the same approaches that we do not have the students' interests at heart. It's just that we perceive their interests differently." She makes a good point: although methods may be different, teachers are using approaches that they perceive to be in the best interest of the students.

Overall, my research went fairly well, but with more time I would create short questionnaires to distribute to a larger number of students to determine if others agreed with the students I interviewed. Although I received detailed responses in the interviews I conducted, these responses were from only four individuals; I would like to have a larger sample size to better represent the number of students taking WAW at UTPA. For example, in fall 2010, when I was enrolled in the first semester of ENG 1301, there were 526 students taking similar WAW courses with 15 instructors; 1,257 students were taking non-WAW courses with 21 instructors. In spring 2011, when I conducted my interviews, 1,592 students were enrolled in ENG 1302, and of those, 370 were taking WAW courses with 10 instructors, and the remaining 1222 were in non-WAW courses with 18 instructors. I also believe that the study would have benefited had I asked more questions in my interviews. I would have asked professors their opinion about students having more than one program in FYC to choose from, and I would have asked students how they felt about having a choice in learning programs for their FYC courses. I'm not sure if including these questions would have drastically changed the outcome of my research, but I believe the responses would have added complexity to the findings.

There is much more to study that I believe would benefit students and teachers alike in FYC, in terms of what teachers and students are actually accomplishing and what they perceive is being accomplished. In comparing WAW and non-WAW courses, we are in some ways comparing inquiry-based learning courses with traditionally taught courses, so more research is needed in order to compare these methods properly (see Spronken-Smith). As a student who was enrolled in two semesters of WAW, I wonder if the learning happening in courses whose content is something besides writing engages students in their own writing development in the same way as WAW-based courses do. If the subject of FYC is in fact writing and if we, as students, are responsible for learning and empowering our writing practices through the FYC course, then the content of the course should reflect these goals. Should a key outcome of the course be for students to gain a better understanding of their own writing processes? If we can understand what students believe are the benefits of inquiry-based and non-inquiry-based courses, then maybe we could find more ways to engage students in the goals of FYC.

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