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Of What Value is a Scholarly Writing Course for Doctoral Students?

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Abstract

The data from evaluations of a scholarly writing course in a counselor education program are matched with observations in the professional literature on: (a) a shortage of literature about the nature of the scholarly writing process at the graduate level, (b) the belief that the process of becoming a scholarly writer is complex, time consuming, and developmental, and (c) the idea that an experienced mentor is an important component of the developmental process. An accumulation of shared data from local studies is recommended as a feasible strategy for building a database about the nature and effects of scholarly writing training.

Academic writing at the graduate level is purported to be a complex and often novel undertaking for students. Indeed, expectations regarding breadth and depth, and the diverse range of writing demands (e.g., article critiques, academic papers, grant writing), call for new insights and increased levels of skill. As early as the 1970s, Leming (1977) advocated for instructional support to prepare graduate students for the rigors of professional survival, and Struck (1976) reported on a course specifically designed to support graduate writing skills. Since then, numerous studies have addressed writing at the undergraduate level while the nature of the writing process at the graduate level has been largely ignored (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007).

Mullen (2006) insisted that novice researchers and writers must be initiated into an academic writing culture. Yet, according to Caffarella and Barnett (2000), university faculty members often assume that their doctoral students begin graduate studies as proficient writers and may not expose them to the scholarly writing process until they reach the dissertation phase of their studies.

The counselor education field is not immune from this challenge. In the counselor education domain, Lambie, Sias, Davis, Lawson, and Akos (2008) concluded that scholarly writing is a requisite academic behavior and an ethical responsibility for counselor educators and their students. Additional sources from the professional literature led Lambie et al. to emphasize that becoming competent as a scholarly writer is a developmental process that can be enhanced with more experienced writers mentoring inexperienced writers (cf. Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Mullen, 2006).

Lambie et al. (2008) recommended that scholarly writing mentors provide specific, tangible, detailed directions that are consistently employed by all program faculty members and that class time should be devoted to enhancing the scholarly writing competence of students. Lambie et al. further noted the importance of a comprehensive mentoring approach that includes attention to helping students acquire conceptualizing, composing, and editing competence. Concluding comments by Lambie et al. emphasized that becoming a competent scholarly writer demands a considerable amount of time and exposes inexperienced writers to addressing a complex set of challenging variables that interact with each other throughout the publication process.

Scholarly writing has also been labeled as academic writing and scientific writing or reporting. General aspects of scholarly writing are: (a) precise language, (b) semi-formal language, (c) impersonal content, (d) objective content, and (e) clear communication (i.e., ideas presented in an orderly manner and expressed smoothly and concisely; American Psychological Association [APA], 2010). The process of becoming a scholarly writer includes an appropriate attitude, sufficient knowledge about the process, and sufficient skills to engage in the process successfully (Lambie et al., 2008).

Scholarly writings from the professional literature highlight reasons why organized curriculum interventions may be important for counselor education programs to consider. Magnuson, Norem, and Haberstroh (2001) suggested that graduates are more likely to seek careers in academia if they have a sense of scholarly writing competence. One important ingredient in that sense of competence is reduced stress from anxiety related to scholarly writing (Hill, 2004). Furthermore, graduates who have scholarly writing competence or a publication history will probably appear to be better prospects when interviewing for academic positions (Magnuson et al., 2001; Seipel, 2003). Graduates are also more likely to conduct research, publish and present their findings, and achieve tenure and promotion (Ramsey, Cavallaro, Kiselica, & Zila, 2002; Seipel, 2003).

There are several alternative ways that a scholarly writing mentoring process might be manifested. The complexities associated with scholarly writing and the perceived lengthy duration of the developmental process from novice to higher levels of sophistication suggest that one legitimate approach is devoting a course within a counselor education program curriculum to enhancing scholarly writing competence. Sharing information about and findings from evaluations of a counselor education program course devoted primarily to that purpose is the goal of the present report.

Observations from the primarily conceptual professional literature cited above are the foundation of the presentation herein. The important observations that seemed to have potential for being addressed by evaluating an extant scholarly writing course for graduate students were as follows: (a) the view that there is a shortage of literature about

the nature of the scholarly writing process at the graduate level (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007); (b) the belief that the process of becoming a successful scholarly writer is complex, time consuming, and developmental (Lambie et al., 2008); and (c) the idea that having an experienced scholarly writing mentor is an important component of the developmental process (Lambie et al., 2008).

Two independent evaluations of the scholarly writing course are presented herein. The outcome variable in the first evaluation study was scholarly writing self-efficacy. The self-efficacy data were collected over the duration of the scholarly writing course in order to study the effect of complex, time-consuming instruction by an experienced mentor on an important scholarly writing outcome variable (i.e., self-efficacy) and whether there was evidence of a developmental process (i.e., improved average scholarly writing self-efficacy scores over the duration of the course). The goal of the second evaluation was more open-ended. Retrospective interviews of former students who had completed the course contained questions that could address the literature-based observations listed above while also being open to additional discoveries. Descriptive information about the scholarly writing unit is located in the appendix. The university's institutional review board for research on human subjects approved both evaluation studies.

Evaluation of Scholarly Writing Self-Efficacy

Participants

Twelve counselor education doctoral students completed the two-semester course in 2010-2011. The mean age was 35.5 with a standard deviation of 6.5 years and a range of 21 years (26-47). Seven participants were women and five men. Six participants were African American, five were White Americans and one was an Asian international student.

Instrumentation

The Writing Self-Efficacy Scales (WSES; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989) consists of two scales. The original goal for the WSES was to “assess writing self-efficacy and outcome expectations in order to study the relationship among beliefs about one's writing capabilities, expected outcomes for writing, and writing performance” (Pajares & Johnson, 1994, p. 315). Research findings have consistently shown that self-efficacy beliefs and writing performance are related (Pajares & Johnson, 1994). The first scale, consisting of 19 items, was designed to assess college students' confidence in their ability to perform a set of *general writing skills*. The content of this scale led to using the descriptor, General Writing Skills Self-Efficacy Scale (GWSSSES) in the present study for the first WSES scale. The purpose of the second WSES scale, consisting of eight items, was to assess confidence in one's ability to complete *specific writing tasks*. This scale was labeled as Writing Tasks Self-Efficacy (WTSE) in the present study.

Alpha reliability coefficients of .92 for the GWSSSES and .95 for the WTSE were relatively high. Factor analytic correlations between items and subscale scores were positive and exceeded .40 for all items across the two scales, indicating that they were satisfactory for retention in the final scales (Shell et al., 1989).

One item from the GWSSSES (“Author a scholarly article for publication in a professional journal in your field”) was employed as a third self-efficacy measure in the present study because it mirrored the task that participants were being prepared to accomplish (i.e., Scholarly Article Scale [SAS]).

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants completed the scholarly writing self-efficacy scales in the classroom setting at the beginning of the scholarly writing unit during the fall semester and at the end of the fall semester in 2011, and independently at the end of the spring semester in 2012 after completing their final mentoring sessions and submitting their manuscripts for publication review. Data from the three components of the Writing Self-Efficacy Scales (Shell et al., 1989) were analyzed similarly via matched pairs correlated *t*-tests between the pre- and mid-training, pre- and end of training, and mid- and end of training components. Since all participants were enrolled in the course and required to complete the same assignments, a true experimental design with a control group was not feasible. Consequently, a pre-experimental pre-test/posttest, no control group design was used. Data were collected and analyzed by two doctoral students who had not yet been enrolled in the scholarly writing unit.

Results

General Writing Skills Self-Efficacy Scale (GWSSSES)

Two of the three comparisons yielded significant findings at the .05 alpha level. Significant differences were found between the pre- and mid-training measurements, $t(11) = 3.07, p = .011, d = 0.89, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.43, 14.71]$, and the pre- and end of training measurements, $t(10) = 5.04, p = .001, d = 1.52, 95\% \text{ CI } [6.58, 17.00]$.

Writing Tasks Self-Efficacy Scale (WTSE)

None of the comparisons on the WTSE measures were significant.

Scholarly Article Scale (SAS)

All of the comparisons on this item were significant. They were the pre- and mid-training, $t(11) = 2.82, p = .02, d = 0.81, \text{ CI } [3.93, 32.06]$; pre- and end of training, $t(10) = 4.51, p = .001, d = 1.36, \text{ CI } [15.23, 44.95]$; and mid- and end of training, $t(10) = 3.16, p = .01, d = 0.95, \text{ CI } [3.30, 19.05]$, comparisons.

The discussion component of this study is included in a general discussion section following the method and results sections of the second study.

Evaluation of Retrospective Perspectives of Graduates

Evaluation Design

The goal was to attempt to understand the experiences and acquire recommendations of former students who had been enrolled in the scholarly writing unit. A phenomenological tradition served as the foundation for the study (Creswell, 2013). The lived experiences of the participants were explored retrospectively in order for the

interviewers to have a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Panton, Martin, McClunie-Trust, & Weir, 2004).

Participants

The population for this evaluation of the unit was 32 former doctoral students who had completed a similar scholarly writing assignment in 2003, 2005, 2007, or 2009. Ten of the former students, representing each of the four cohorts listed above, participated in the study. The average age was 40.30 ($SD = 5.56$). There were five men and five women. Seven were White Americans, two were African Americans, and one participant was an international Hispanic woman. Seven were counselor educators, two were in private practice in mental health settings, and one was a high school dean of students.

Instrumentation

The evaluation team consisted of the same two doctoral students who collected and analyzed the data in the first study. They developed a set of eight questions for a semi-structured telephone interview of the participants with the assistance of the course instructor. Content of the questions was based on the targeted suggestions from the literature about the challenges associated with acquiring scholarly writing competence presented in the introduction. The questions were open ended and designed to elicit retrospective information related to what the participants remembered about the scholarly writing assignment, what kind of scholarly writing activities they had been engaged in since taking the course, how the course impacted their scholarly writing and their present careers, what kind of scholarly writing they had conducted, how the course influenced their scholarly writing self-efficacy, and recommendations they had for improving the experience.

Procedure

Data collection. The pool of 32 possible participants was stratified according to year of taking the scholarly writing course, gender, and race. Invitations were sent via electronic mail by the two investigators. Six of the graduates in the first set of invitees responded. Six more were drawn from the stratified pool and sent invitations. Four agreed to participate for a total of 10 participants. It was determined that Englander's (2012) criteria for a minimum sample size and Merriam's (2002) criteria for a purposeful sample had been met.

Each participant provided information about when they were available to be interviewed by telephone and appointments were arranged. The participants were instructed to call a pre-determined 800 telephone number that allowed the investigators to conduct the interviews via the Google Voice software system that created password protected digital files of the recorded interviews. The investigators used the set of eight pre-determined questions to conduct the semi-structured interviews and used probes to further articulate initial answers to the open-ended questions. Although the sample size was set and represented 31% of the population, the investigators agreed that the answers to the questions across the 10 participants were similar enough to assume evidence of saturation (Wertz et al., 2005).

Data analysis. The research team hired a professional transcriber who transformed the audio data to a Word document. She had signed a confidentiality statement, and the audio data did not contain information that would identify the participants. The two investigators compared the transcriptions to the audio files line by line to ensure accuracy. A few minor corrections of professional terms that were not familiar to the transcriber were made. The transcriptions were then sent to the participants for member checks as a means of establishing credibility of the data and giving the participants an opportunity to validate the texts and add any further information they considered necessary to present their real experiences accurately (Cho & Trent, 2006).

The two investigators proceeded to independently code the data from each participant. Then they met to discuss the independent coding of individual participants and agreed upon joint codes and categories in order to enhance internal validity and reliability (Merriam, 2002). Personal biases about the study and the participants were discussed throughout the investigation. The next step was to categorize the codes into themes under each category. Six categories emerged from the phenomenological analysis, and they serve as headings in the following section.

Results

Impressions of the Scholarly Writing Assignment

All participants expressed positive remarks about the scholarly writing assignment. Two themes emerged.

General feelings. The feelings most often expressed were that it was helpful and useful. Individual expressions included “great idea, thorough, extremely useful, pretty important, daunting, and pertinent.”

Specific feelings. Regarding the usefulness of the assignment, the participants expressed that it is a necessary course, followed a very methodical process, was developmentally appropriate, helped them understand the scholarly writing process, helped them manage the publication process, taught skills they would be able to replicate, was the first opportunity to submit a manuscript to a journal, provided valuable information and resources, devoted important class time to studying the APA publication manual, and provided remedial grammar assistance. Considerable emphasis was placed upon the importance of editorial feedback, useful insights, and good instruction received from the course instructor.

Impact of the Scholarly Writing Assignment

All participants mentioned a positive impact of the assignment on their scholarly writing as well as on their present careers. Five themes emerged.

Positive influence of the class. Sample expressions included “very useful, very productive, (affected) greatly, extremely valuable, and (affected) positively.”

Improved writing skills. Expressions included “positively improved my writing, improved it, enhanced my writing skills, and helped my writing.”

Lessons learned. Participants mentioned the importance of research and how to utilize the research of other scholarly writers, research and writing preparation, studying the APA publication manual, understanding the importance of being detailed in writing, and the importance of thinking about an audience when writing.

Importance of learning the process and replicating it in future projects. This theme was based on comments such as “it gave me the tools I needed to write, illustrated a process of scholarly writing, and unlocked the ability to imitate that process over and over again.”

The outcomes. This theme was defined by comments such as “I was able to make revisions, submit to another journal and eventually got it published; gave me an overview of how it looks like to publish and how the process will be, unfortunately it was not successful, and the class also helped me in writing my own dissertation.”

Impact on Present Career

The participants mentioned general impressions, lessons learned, and provided specific examples of how they had used the skills developed via the scholarly writing assignment. The general impression was positive with participants using adjectives such as “good, useful, and helpful” to describe the experience.

More specific comments about the impact on their careers included learning how to use APA style correctly, increased emphasis on quality of one’s writing, enhanced writing skills, and realization of the importance of thoughtful preparation of content. Examples of the impact on their careers included continuing to write for publication, using the acquired skills and information consistently, developing an interest in collaborating with colleagues in research projects, training others to use the APA publication guidelines, and teaching and stressing good writing skills to others.

Impact on Scholarly Writing Self-Efficacy

When answering the question “How did the class influence your scholarly writing self-efficacy,” the participants seemed to move from very general expressions such as “positive influence” and “100 percent” to remembering more detail about what they had achieved such as “get clear about the steps, helped me understand literature reviews better, and I never really thought of myself as being a writer or one that will write and publish in a journal. I did have the ability to produce scholarly type work.” Participants gradually moved from having some confidence, “understood how to set it up” and “each piece that I was writing I got very confident at very quickly” to expressing higher levels of self-efficacy: “hey, I can write and write well enough to publish in a journal, you know, scholarly writing journal; made me a better writer; have a better self-efficacy about writing and writing academically; and became a purposeful writer.”

Further Scholarly Writing Activities

The scholarly writing activity since taking the course varied considerably. The range of publication varied from the dissertation (technically unpublished) to the dissertation and published articles and book chapters. The question elicited mention of numerous conference presentations from one of the participants.

Recommendations to Improve the Scholarly Writing Training

Participants emphasized the importance of having more opportunities for scholarly writing throughout the training program, suggested greater continuity between courses related to scholarly writing (e.g., initiate the process in one course so the final product will be more “journal ready” and add an advanced course in scholarly writing),

and having more opportunities to interact with faculty members in order to de-mystify the process.

They also stressed the need to learn about more than writing scholarly literature reviews and suggested conceptual articles and group projects in order to create stronger articles and possible future collaborations. Additional recommendations included: (a) providing more time for understanding the search process and how to locate and utilize existing research, (b) dedicating more time in the fall portion of the course to scholarly writing, and (c) having more class time devoted to acquiring information about journals, types of journals, how to select a journal, journal audiences, and how to submit manuscripts

Discussion

The findings from the two studies appear to have provided information that addressed the observations from the previous professional literature about scholarly writing cited in the introduction. The quantitative outcome data from the first study indicated that scholarly self-efficacy is enhanced over time when graduate students are engaged in comprehensive instruction consisting of group didactic and discursive presentations and individual mentoring. The data support the suppositions by Lambie et al. (2008) about the process being developmental in nature and the importance of mentoring during the process.

Findings from the phenomenological study also pointed to the importance of mentoring and provided evidence of a developmental process. All of the former students appeared to believe the experience was helpful and had a positive impact on their professional careers. In addition, the former students indicated that the process was complex and consisted of several important nuances such as the importance of thinking about one's audience, of being detailed in writing, and of revising and resubmitting one's manuscript if it is not accepted. These nuances seem to indicate developmental growth that occurred at the time or had occurred thereafter in conjunction with the original training experience.

From a developmental perspective, participants mentioned moving from having some confidence to expressing higher levels of self-efficacy about scholarly writing. Components of the perceived self-efficacy included understanding literature reviews better, writing well enough to publish in journals, and becoming purposeful writers. While indicating that the learning process was developmental when the participants were students, the findings also indicated that the developmental process had continued after graduation. Consequently, it might be observed that the scholarly writing developmental process begins with a very important set of comprehensive training components for graduate students that serve as a foundation for continued positive development after graduation.

The data from the present evaluation studies appear to provide useful information that may add to the apparently sparse professional literature about the scholarly writing process at the graduate level (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). The data seem to support conceptual suppositions made by earlier writers such as Lambie et al. (2008) and Mullen (2006).

The phenomenological study also provided new information beyond the general goals expressed prior to the studies. Comments from the participants indicated that at least two of the important contributions from mentors are valuable editorial feedback on earlier iterations of the manuscripts and insights that were offered during the mentoring sessions. The participants also commented on secondary impacts of the scholarly writing experience on their professional careers such as feeling competent to teach others how to engage in scholarly writing, collaborating with colleagues in scholarly writing endeavors, and continuing to write for publication.

The findings were limited to a population of doctoral students being mentored by one faculty member at a southeastern land grant university. A pre-experimental design, lacking a control group, was used in the quantitative study, and the scholarly writing self-efficacy instrument had been originally designed for undergraduate participants. The investigators in the phenomenological study were doctoral students who had taken one graduate level qualitative research course and were mentored by individuals with qualitative research experience. Given that some of the first wave of invitees to participate in the phenomenological study did not respond, there could have been former students who had less positive recollections about the scholarly writing training who chose not to participate. Even though confidentiality was promised and honored, all former students knew their former mentor was a co-author of the study, and they may have hesitated to be critical for a number of reasons.

Recommendations for improving courses such as the one evaluated in the present study are as follows. Expand the common scholarly writing assignment given to all students beyond literature reviews to conceptual manuscripts. Provide more time for understanding the search process and how to locate and utilize existing research. Dedicate more time in the fall section of the course to scholarly writing. Devote more class time to acquiring information about journals, selecting journals, and the process of submitting manuscripts. Provide more time for students to engage in focus group like interactions among themselves about the entire scholarly writing process.

Recommendations for improving scholarly writing training beyond one course dedicated to it are as follows. Provide more opportunities for scholarly writing development throughout the training program across courses and across faculty members. Begin this process early in the training program. Have both an introductory and an advanced scholarly writing course. Find a multitude of ways to demystify the process for students.

Recommendations for further research begin with the limitations of the present study. More generalizable research findings would be generated by studies employing true experimental designs and consisting of samples from populations across several training programs. Such studies will seem more valid if conducted by veteran researchers working collaboratively across several higher education institutions.

The research ideas stated above are somewhat utopian in nature. Realistically, localized studies such as those in the current report are more feasible than expecting some collective group of scholars to collaborate across campus on this issue. Consequently, a host of local action research studies similar to the present ones may be a better recommendation. An accumulation of shared data from local studies may be the most useful strategy for building a database about the nature and effects of scholarly writing training.

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Appendix

Overview of Content of Scholarly Writing Course in Present Studies

Highlights of Fall Semester Content

- Writing for publication
- Content and organization of a manuscript
- Selecting topics
- Ethical and legal issues
- Manuscript structure and content
- Writing clearly and concisely
- Mechanics of style
- Searching and evaluating the literature
- Retrieving and evaluating information from the Web
- Taking notes and avoiding unintentional plagiarism
- Preparing a topic outline
- Writing the first draft
- Revising and refining the first draft
- Writing titles and abstracts
- Manuscript preparation
- Preparing a reference list
- Critique of a model article

Spring Semester: The course instructor/mentor met with each student individually over the course of the semester until the manuscript was completed and submitted to a journal. The process consisted of meetings and electronic messages with the instructor serving as an editorial consultant. Students were expected to schedule at least two appointments per month. Over the course of the semester, the instructor read and edited several iterations of the manuscript. The recommended process was to approach the manuscript development in parts (i.e., introduction first, then body, then closing section) with the references being built continuously. Students were expected to follow the APA manuscript preparation format from the beginning to the end (i.e., cover page, abstract, pagination, running head, font and type size, double spacing throughout, spacing, and margins). Individual sessions consisted of answering students' questions, discussing strategies and goals, clarifying manuscript content and mentor edits/recommendations, and fruitful brainstorming.