Identifying College Students' Self-Perceptions of Writing Skills

Whitney Whitaker
Graduate Assistant
Department of Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
(806) 742-2880
whitney.whitaker@ttu.edu

Cara R. Lawson
Graduate Research Assistant
Department of Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
(806) 742-2880
cara.lawson@ttu.edu

Courtney Meyers
Professor and Graduate Studies Coordinator
Department of Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
(806) 834-4364
Courtney.meyers@ttu.edu

Identifying College Students' Self-Perceptions of Writing Skills

Introduction

Even in the digital age, strong writing skills continue to rank number one as a desired skill among employers looking for college graduates (Morgan, 2012). With such a demand, universities are recognizing there is a need for improved writing skills and are working to meet this call. In 2013, Lingwall and Kuehn stated that regardless of writing programs put in place, the millennial generation is not benefiting from current methods of teaching. To improve students' writing abilities, new teaching approaches need to be adopted, but first, students' writing self-perceptions need to be understood (Lingwall & Kuehn, 2013). Learning about students' writing perceptions and apprehension can prove valuable to create effective educational experiences specific to each students' skillset (Daly, 1978).

Conceptual Framework

To learn more about students' writing perceptions, Lingwall (2010) presented an approach built on writing apprehension and self-efficacy. Writing apprehension is a measure of anxiety or avoidance of writing (Faigley et al., 1981). Students with low writing apprehension often feel confident about their writing skills; whereas, high apprehension students often ignore learning due to heightened anxiety (Fischer & Meyers, 2017). Self-efficacy is one's beliefs in their abilities to complete or perform a behavior (Bandura, 1997). To measure self-efficacy, individuals often rely upon successes or failures (Schunk, 2003). Those with low self-efficacy often stray from challenges, have weak goals and levels of commitment, and are more affected by failure (Bandura, 2010). In a writing context, writing self-efficacy is influenced by a student's self-perceptions of their own ability to write (Lingwall & Kuehn, 2013). Understanding students' motivations and desires to achieve are important factors to consider when a teacher seeks to improve students' writing self-efficacy. Students' anxiety and apprehension toward writing can be reflected in their work (Faigley et al., 1981). Using writing apprehension and self-efficacy in different teaching approaches led Lingwall (2010) to study various approaches to teaching writing and the development of the Media Writing Self-Perception (MWSP) scale.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore college students' writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, and writing self-perceptions using the Media Writing Self-Perception Scale (Lingwall & Kuehn, 2013). The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did students' MWSP scores change from the beginning to the end of the semester?
2. How did the students describe changes in the MWSP scores as a result of the course?

Methodology

The population of this study was undergraduate students within an upper-level, writing-intensive agricultural communications course. Using a quantitative, pretest-posttest design, students completed the Media Writing Self-Perception (MWSP) scale at both the beginning and end of the semester. The MWSP scale was distributed to all 32 students in the class via Qualtrics; however, only 26 students completed both the pretest and posttest. The MWSP scale measured students' writing self-perceptions via 50 Likert-type questions to assess perceptions within five constructs: 1) elaborative/surface, 2) reflective/revisionist, 3) self-efficacy, 4) writing apprehension, and 5) social media/professional. Each construct score was individually calculated and then compiled to attain the total MWSP score, as described by Lingwall and Kuehn (2013). Paired sample t-tests were also calculated to compare scores

from pretest to posttest. After receiving their posttest MWSP score, students responded to four reflection questions. These reflection questions were then analyzed using coding techniques outlined by Saldaña (2013).

Results/Findings

A paired samples t-test was conducted for each of the five constructs identified by Lingwall and Kuehn (2013) to determine differences in scores from the beginning of the semester to the end. A statistically significant difference in pretest and posttest scores was found for three constructs: writing self-efficacy $t(25)=5.88$, $p<.05$; writing apprehension $t(25)=4.08$, $p<.05$; and elaborative/surface construct $t(25)=3.65$, $p<.05$. The reflective/revisionist and social media/professional scores were not statistically different.

Open-ended responses to the reflection questions were analyzed to identify emergent themes within the data to understand specific issues (Creswell, 2013). When asked to reflect on how beneficial the writing assignments were, one student said: "The applied activities followed by client activities really helped me understand the different types of writing. I think this extra work, instead of rushing straight to client work, helped me reflect more on the necessary format and style of each project and refine it."

Another reflection question asked students to comment on their reactions to how their MWSP scores changed. One student who had an improvement in scores, said it was "just a little bizarre to see how someone can change throughout one semester and a writing class." However, another student wrote: "My scores didn't change too much, but they all improved a little, which doesn't surprise me. This course definitely improved my confidence in writing." Students reported they were excited to complete future writing assignments in the areas of creative writing, blog posts, feature stories, and news writing. When asked what areas of writing they still viewed as weaknesses, they identified the following: 1) grammar, spelling and punctuation, 2) Associated Press style, 3) planning and taking initiative of the writing process, and 4) concise and organized writing.

Conclusions

The results indicated statistically significant changes in some, but not all, MWSP constructs. This illustrates that writing is a complex undertaking and using one measure to determine students' perceptions may not be adequate. The pretest-posttest research design recognized how students' MWSP scores changed over the semester. Completing more rigorous assignments, receiving feedback, and reflecting on the process may have reduced anxiety about writing; therefore, improving confidence. Insignificant differences in two constructs could be attributed to lack of time spent in class on those specific areas of social media and personal revisions. The reflection questions provided insight about how students perceived the writing process and identified what aspects of the course helped them along with additional areas of needed focus.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

In order to improve students' writing skills, it is recommended that instructors use the MWSP scale to understand students' writing self-perceptions. In addition, providing structured and challenging assignments relevant to real-world scenarios was beneficial to improve students' writing self-efficacy. Allowing students to reflect on their own writing can lead to more effective writers that employers need (Morgan, 2012). The information gathered from this study can be beneficial to instructors in numerous writing courses if their goal is to continuously improve their students' writing abilities.

References

Bandura, A. (1997). Self-Efficacy: The exercise of control. *W.H. Freeman and Company.*

Bandura, A. (2010) Self-Efficacy. *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology*. http://doi.org /10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0836

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Daly, J.A. (1978). Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency. The *Journal of Educational Research, 72(1),* 10-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1978.10885110

Faigley, L., Daly, J.A., & Witte, S.P. (1981). The role of writing apprehension in writing performance and competence. *Journal of Educational Research,* 75(1), 16-21. https:/doi.org/ 10.1080/00220671.1981.10885348

Fischer, L.M., & Meyers, C. (2017). Determining changes in students writing apprehension scores in a writing intensive course: A pre-test, post-test design. *Journal of Agricultural Education,* 58(1), 69-84. https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2017.01069

Lingwall, A. (2010). Rigor or Remediation? Exploring writing proficiency and assessment measures in journalism and mass communication. *Journalism and Mass Communication,* 65, 283-302. https:/doi.org/10.1177/107769581006500306

Lingwall, A., & Kuehn, S. (2013). Measuring student self-perceptions of writing skills in programs of journalism and mass communication. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator,* 68(4), 365-386. https:/doi.org/10.1177/1077695813506991

Morgan, A.C. (2012). Competencies needed by agricultural communication undergraduates: A focus group study of alumni. *Journal of Applied Communication, 96(2),* 17-28. https:// doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1146

Saldaña, J. (2012). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schunk, D.H. (2003). Self-efficacy for reading and writing: Influence of modeling, goal setting, and self-evaluation. *Reading and Writing Quarterly, 19,* 159-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/10573560390143094