

Dancers' Scholarly Writing Skills Amid a Climate of Virtual Gratification

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Abstract:

For the past twenty years, reflective writing has been emphasized over expository writing in education. This tactic has encouraged more involvement in writing, due to reflective writing's emphasis on understanding of self in relation to the world. While this focus has been positive, I argue that our writing culture has become less aware of how to communicate deeper expository skills. Dancers are often asked to write about their dancing, dances, and personal life experiences and they have become good at this skill. Because we are living in a culture of fast paced, virtual communication and an increasing focus on advanced technical dance skills, dance majors are increasingly devaluing the time-consuming task of carefully crafted, scholarly writing skills. Much hand holding is often required to prepare dancers for the requisite writing tasks they will face when they emerge from the academy and have to cope in the business of shaping their careers. The cultural milieu fostered by both the virtual world and a focus on competitive dance has bred a mindset for today's dance majors that physical training must take precedence over intellectual pursuits. While we may not be able to change this culture, I am recreating and researching the writing pedagogy for the dance major.

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Article:

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Dancers' Scholarly Writing Skills Amid a Climate of Virtual Gratification

Teresa Heiland, PhD, CLMA

ABSTRACT

For the past twenty years, reflective writing has been emphasized over expository writing in education. This tactic has encouraged more involvement in writing, due to reflective writing's emphasis on understanding of self in relation to the world. While this focus has been positive, I argue that our writing culture has become less aware of how to communicate deeper expository skills. Dancers are often asked to write about their dancing, dances, and personal life experiences and they have become good at this skill. Because we are living in a culture of fast paced, virtual communication and an increasing focus on advanced technical dance skills, dance majors are increasingly devaluing the time-consuming task of carefully crafted, scholarly writing skills. Much hand holding is often required to prepare dancers for the requisite writing tasks they will face when they emerge from the academy and have to cope in the business of shaping their careers. The cultural milieu fostered by both the virtual world and a focus on competitive dance has bred a mindset for today's dance majors that physical training must take precedence over intellectual pursuits. While we may not be able to change this culture, I am recreating and researching the writing pedagogy for the dance major.

My aim is to develop dancers who are empowered by the curriculum to write with focus both reflective writing and rhetorical writing. I am researching the changes I've made over the last four years in our curriculum at LMU and how we have imbedded writing pedagogy for dancers. I'm looking especially carefully at how specific writing assignments I've developed are supporting expected outcomes. I share the research outcomes, the curriculum goals with respect to writing, and specific writing assignments designed for dancers. The skills I am working toward are ultimately to help the dancer succeed as a dance professional, but certainly we are focusing on supporting all dancers to succeed in any career to which they might shift.

This paper initially addresses the concerns a university faculty had over several years regarding the level of writing skills among incoming and outgoing dance majors in a four-year liberal arts institution and a need for changes to be made to writing assignments so dancers could both be challenged and inspired to write well and be prepared for careers. The paper also reveals a research study created in response to these concerns, which explores both the culture of the 21st century college dance major in regards to writing skills and writing values and resultant revisions of assignments to better meet students' valuing and career needs. I conducted surveys and short answer questions regarding attitudes about writing and writing assignments from graduating seniors over two years. Students responded before and after their writing assignments were completed. My goal was to better understand dance majors' relationships with writing and also to implement a new approach to writing to meet the goals of literacy in rhetorical expository writing. The outcomes are especially vital for college-level dance educators who might also desire to reshape their writing curricula to support 21st century dancers' needs. Results of the study and the revised curriculum and lesson plans are shared.

Six years ago when I began mentoring university dancers' writing assignments, I was shocked at the lack of enthusiasm required to initiate and develop coherent, meaningful, and purposeful academic writing about dance. I asked myself, "Is the issue of the lack of coherent writing due to how we are handling writing in our department? Is it about writing pedagogy across the university? Is it something in the culture of this generation of students? Is it something to do with a fast paced life with virtual technology spinning in every direction, driving everyone to distraction?" I joked, "Could it be something in the water?" I began examining the writing culture dance majors' usually experience to see if I might discern how the writing curriculum might be adjusted to better support dance majors' writing processes, and so the inquiry and practice might become more a part of dance majors' expected inquiry and expression.

I suspected students' struggle with writing had to do with at least two factors: (1) The dance major is one of the busiest majors at our university, so there is little time to focus on writing projects, and (2) writing assignments in the dance curriculum are usually geared more toward guiding students to respond reflectively to their experiences with dance, but not so much about relating to issues and existing texts about dance. Abels, who speaks about writing across the curriculum, argues that the discipline of dance supports alternative literacies—imagistic and kinesthetic ones—and language remains a contested site of knowledge, a point of dance or a metaphor of dance rather than the central vehicle for the production of knowledge.¹

Dancers are quite comfortable making meaning with their bodies, but not always as easily with words. Abels says that this discipline's complex relationships with language confound common writing across the curriculum pedagogies and call for reexamination of issues such as academic acculturation, alternative literacies, and conceptions of texts that impinge on or challenge writing across the curriculum practice in many disciplines.² Writing instruction for dancers may indeed need to be readjusted to suit inroads to learning that dancers find more natural to them. By examining the habitus of writing, or rather the mindset of the students as characterized by a set of acquired schemata, sensibilities, dispositions, and tastes about writing, and meanwhile look at their writing processes and products, I may be able to discern what pedagogical approaches could be taken to better serve the dance major population.³

Since Abel's dissertation was completed in 1994, most of the research about writing in the field of dance examines reflective writing and speaking about sensory or aesthetic experiences,^{4,5,6,7,8} but little research has explored

academic expository writing among dancers. Mitchell *et al.* look at academic writing in the study of dance in higher education in the UK.⁹ They detail three approaches to literacy education: (1) the study skills approach to gathering skills and then expecting them to transfer over to other contexts, (2) the socialization perspective of inducting students into the expected culture of the academy and of writing, a homogenous society in which someone must fit in to function, and (3) the academic literacies approach in which students are exploring epistemologically and gaining their identity as they process through writing, meanwhile being concerned more with the processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning rather than skills or deficits of skills. This third approach from "New Literacy Studies" is the approach that I foresee could support dancers at our university.¹⁰ Early research findings by Andrews and Thoms indicate that writing in a less formal collaborative space provides an important preliminary setting for introducing formal academic writing; this parallels research on language acquisition.¹¹

One assignment (which is the scope of my current research) in a curriculum is not going to be the "be all and end all" of understanding how to support our students' writing processes. Creating progressions of writing throughout a curriculum is key to supporting students' outcomes. Nevertheless, by examining one senior-year writing assignment—the culture, processes, and products—I aim to understand the culture of academic expository writing among dance majors that relates to concepts learned from prior courses—dance, core curriculum, and elective courses. For purposes of this study, only one culture (seniors) and one assignment (fall semester senior essay) are explored. To set the tone, following are a few quotes from dance majors regarding academic writing. When asked if they had any apprehensions about writing a seven-page essay with source citations, about half of the dance majors in my program reacted with trepidations. They stated:

I just, in general, have trouble taking my thoughts and putting them on paper.

I freak out when I have to write.

I get anxious and my words start to tumble, twist, and make no sense- even though it makes sense in my head. Sometimes it's hard to articulate my thoughts into a written format.

My brain tends to have an overload of thoughts and ideas and it's hard for me to decipher what thoughts are more significant to the message I want to portray!

I just haven't had to write a lot of them and finding time to really devote to it is difficult.

Half the dancers didn't have any worries about academic writing. One dance major actually stated, "I love to write. I plan on being a writer of some sort someday."

During a site visit from the National Association of Schools of Dance (NASD), evaluators said the writing among our dance majors is better than at most colleges, but the dance faculty feels it could be better. Faculty desire to understand the culture of writing among our dancers so that, collectively, we might improve the pedagogy we offer to ensure dancers succeed with writing throughout their lives. To explore the current pedagogy and assignment, I kept questions broad in scope, but generally faculty ask the following: "What is the attitude, culture, and process of dance majors related to writing academic writing?" "What writing problems do students have?" "How can we support students so they overcome hurdles?" I hypothesized that (1) we were not offering optimally scaffolded progressions in the major and core to support ease with writing; (2) because the dance major is one of the busiest majors on campus and they prefer to be performing as much as possible, the culture of the dance program supports reflective, in-the-moment writing, but not much higher order thinking connected to writing processes and products, nor related to important themes and ideas by authors respected in the field of dance; (3) because of the culture of virtual gratification and the speedy world in which we live, students have little patience for the processes writing requires, and hence will rarely set aside sufficient time and devote little effort to produce writing that represents their abilities.

In order to support dancers' writing development, I felt it necessary to carry out action research and qualitative analysis that might reveal students' attitudes and what writing weaknesses prevail in final papers after having gone through one required draft. I thought these data would be helpful as the writing curriculum is reshaped within the dance program. In terms of student attitudes, I have been formally investigating the culture of dancers' writing by having students complete surveys about their feelings and ideas about writing before the assignment, and again after. Most of the survey questions ask for ratings on a five point Likert-type scale with 1 being lowest and five being highest. I have gathered data for two years so far. I am also gathering ratings on all categories of grading rubrics for drafts and final papers. I have begun gathering and coding all the teachers' written comments on students' final papers to discern what aspects of writing are still a struggle for students as they near college graduation. This proceedings document shares a summary of quantitative statistical data gathered from two years of surveys, draft rubric, final paper rubrics, chair's surveys, and mentors' surveys. Qualitative results are presented in another paper.

Method

Participants

At a medium size Jesuit Marymount Liberal Arts University where a Bachelor of Arts in Dance is offered, I studied two convenience samples of students (20 during the first year of the study and 25 during the second year) who were enrolled in a course titled Senior Thesis Preparation. All participants were in their fourth and final year of a four-year program and were enrolled in the course because it is a requirement for graduation. The study evolved around this course because a need was found for action research to be conducted to improve student writing by reshaping the pedagogy and the assignment. While need created the demand for research, students who happen to be enrolled in the course now are essentially convenience samples of students. The research will be conducted for a period of five years, and preliminary findings from these two groups of students will intentionally help shape the revision and development of pedagogy that supports best possible student outcomes. The course was taught by the chair of the dance program, although the particular assignment being researched was assigned, instructed, advised, and graded by the researcher (from here on called the mentor to distinguish from the teacher on record), who has a background in both teaching dance and teaching expository writing. After formal application was reviewed, the university Institutional Review Board determined that informed consent was not required for this study.

Materials

Handout with instructions about the assignment

Survey before and after the assignment on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 5 (one being low and 5 being high), and a few short answer questions

Chair's survey of writing history of student

Mentor's survey about each student's progress and expected future success

Rubric used for rating first draft and final paper using a Likert-type scale (from 1-5) for 20 elements of good writing

Final papers with mentor's comments will be analyzed qualitatively to ascertain which writing problems prevail after focused mentoring has been completed.

Procedures

Following Lather's "paradigm of praxis" to discern where the main affinities or outcomes lie in action research, the study employs triangulation of qualitative methods with statistical research.¹² The research will be conducted for five years (or five graduating classes), and in that time an educational action research approach may adapt the

research and the teaching so that the needs of students and pedagogical approach are improved to best support student learning outcomes. Qualitative analysis will be applied to data from observations of the culture of dancers writing about dance and about their processes and writing products, surveys, and records/rubrics related to writing assignments. Coding of qualitative data will help to create a report of a prevalence of themes found in the structure and process of writing itself.

The study will take five years to collect sufficient data so that significant statistical outcomes may be revealed. The structure of the study is considered exploratory at this stage because the data gathering is broad in scope to allow the researcher/mentor to periodically narrow some of the data gathering as themes begin to emerge and unnecessary questions can be weeded out. Preliminary research has allowed some of this narrowing to begin, and in the spirit of action research, information can be applied to improve the teaching, the assignment itself, and also reshape the study. Statistical research is most effective when the survey questions are few and the number of participants is many. Over time, as more graduating classes pass through, the numbers will go up and the questioning will be more pinpointed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before beginning the study, students were told that the dance faculty were interested in learning about the culture of dance majors' writing attitudes and processes so that we could reexamine the assignments offered in the major and the core curriculum to ensure we are offering a progression that best supports students' writing abilities.

All data represented by Likert-type ratings (all survey data), were transferred into and analyzed with SPSS software (manufactured by IBM) for statistical significance between various questions and groups of questions. These data include: (1) The chair of the department completed a survey about each student's writing history and success, as she perceived it. (2) The mentors (there were two, as this researcher was on sabbatical one semester) also completed a survey about each student's progress throughout this assignment and predicted future success with this type of writing. (3) Mentors also completed a formative and summative rubric for students to understand their progress and final grade. Information on these rubrics was statistically analyzed. Qualitative analysis was conducted of (1) all comments written by mentors on final drafts, to assess types of writing issues that still seem to exist after much mentoring and revising; (2) a few short answer questions from the student surveys.

Data analysis will be purposely in flux between

qualitative and quantitative throughout the research process to gain both action research outcomes for revising the teaching; both qualitative and statistical outcomes will be used to report findings.

Results

This report details findings from two years of survey data from students, chair, and mentors, and from the rubrics for the drafts and final grade reports for student papers. As noted above, the study is exploratory and over time will be continuously reshaped until the method is narrowed to reveal the most important themes in this body of research.

Vivian Lew, faculty at the UCLA Statistics Consulting Center analyzed the Likert-type data and produced 450 pages of preliminary results, which I will summarize herein. At the time of writing, the qualitative data were being analyzed by a research assistant at the university and was half completed. The research assistant coded data and gathered it into themes, which will be used to develop theory of ongoing needs among this population of writers. This part of the research will be presented at a later date.

A few complications emerged. Sometimes students circled two answers, resulting in a response between, e.g. 2 and 3, such as 2.5. In statistical analysis, this factor reduced the types of analysis that could be conducted. Also, because two different mentors graded the assignment, it is possible that approaches to grading may have differed from one to the other. This will become less of an issue as more participants experience the study, but this factor will play into any changes that might be occurring over time due to action research having strengthened the teaching.

Values and Attitudes about Writing

When asked (after) if dance majors would need to be good at writing in their careers, students rated high at 4.24. Their ratings were slightly higher (4.44) when asked if non-dance-majors would need to be good writers in their careers. This was not statistically significant, but it does reveal that dancers think they don't need to be quite as good as others at writing to be successful in careers.

When asked (before) if students valued being a good writer, the mean response was 4.25 with a fairly narrow standard deviation of .9135. This reveals that these students value highly being good writers. When asked the same question after completing the assignment (after), students' responses went up slightly higher to 4.37 with a standard deviation of .675 indicating that their attitude about valuing good writing had risen slightly and the pool narrowed their attitude.

When asked (before) if they found writing easy, the mean response was 3.487, with a standard deviation of 1.455. The S.D. reveals that there was a moderately wide range of responses. Responses about writing being easy went down a

bit after the course from 3.487 to 3.329. Students attitudes about whether high school and the core curriculum supported their writing skills was about the same before and after the assignment, and it was high, around 4.0. The chair's assessment of students knowledge of academic writing before the assignment was just a bit lower at 3.89, but she rated their success with it much lower at 2.9389 (S.D. of 1.49541, indicating a rather wide spread among students). Students rated their performance level at academic writing fairly high, but after the assignment this score dropped a bit, from 4.39 to 4.16.

When asked if students were good at writing two different types of writing (1) personal reflective essays, and (2) persuasive essays, their responses differed greatly: (1) they believe they are fairly good at reflective essays: 3.387 (before) and 4.41 (after), and less so at persuasive essays: 3.095 (before) and a little better after at 3.57.

Students' attitudes before this assignment reveal they felt stronger about their skill with research papers than reflective or persuasive essays, but after the assignment they scored reflective essays higher than both research papers and persuasive essays. They have had much more experience with reflective writing and the after-assignment scores tend to agree with what I thought about the writing culture they've experienced.

When asked about their success with writing research papers that focus around a thesis topic and citations students scored fairly high with 3.764 (before) and even higher after at 3.987. Students feel they cite fairly well with an average response of 3.63 (before) and 4.092 (after). This score rose a little, which could indicate that the assignment instilled confidence in their skill level. Ironically, drafts reveal students were unfocused or lacked skill in this respect at 2.780 and 3.750, which is considerably lower than students' attitude about their successes with citing. After the assignment was completed, the two mentors rated students' abilities to cite and their average score of 3.544 is still a bit lower than students' ratings.

When asked if students felt devoted to writing in general, the answers before and after didn't change too much, 3.934 before to a bit lower after at 3.829. Students were also asked to rate their devotion to reflective and expository writing before and after. Scores went down a little for both, but reflective writing is somewhat easier to devote attention to than expository academic writing (reflective before 4.21 and 4.11 after; academic expository and research writing at 3.76 before and a 3.75 after). The difference between the two was in favor of reflective writing by .405 points.

From Draft to Final Document

Students reported on average that they spent 1.40279

hours revising from the rough draft to the final version of the paper. This figure does not take into account that a few students processed through several drafts.

Rubric items that scored lowest on the drafts were about organization of the document in terms of flow of ideas to get to a final topic, being organized and in-depth to create meaning, and basic transitions between paragraphs. This is likely a normal process in writing and conclusions at this stage of the research should not be made that this finding has anything to do with dance majors. Organization and focusing of ideas improved overall to give an average score of 3.863. See Table 1.

Table 1 Items on Drafts with Low Scores

Category on rubric	Draft 1	Final Paper	Change
Body of text focused to evolve to a conclusion	2.114	3.784	1.67
Transitions between Paragraphs function well	2.818	3.875	1.057
Essay is organized, focused, in-depth	2.842	3.93	1.088

Rubric items that improved, but remained low on final drafts were related to grammar and syntax. The score for grammar and syntax on the rough draft was not terribly low, but of some concern at 3.068. The score improved by only .364 points, indicating that our dancers are producing grammar and syntactical levels of a C-, if the Likert-type scale is translated into a grading scale. This seems low and I believe could be attributed to amount of practice or knowledge with writing mechanics being low, or that dancers have not had, or have not allotted, sufficient time to reread and edit their work. See Table 2.

Table 2 Items that Improved, but Remain Low on Final Drafts

Category on rubric	Draft 1	Final Paper	Change
Grammar and syntax	3.068	3.432	.364

Rubrics items that were at acceptable levels on the rough drafts and improved greatly on final drafts were related to tactics to engage readers: relating to the audience, having a more scholarly voice, being creative with source materials, and knowing how to focus without having to be too personal

with the “I” voice. See Table 3.

Table 3 Items that were Acceptable on Draft and Improved Greatly on Final Draft

Category on rubric	Draft 1	Final Paper	Change
Paragraph 1 invites reader	3.318	4.239	.921
Scholarly Voice	3.534 (.6229)	4.477	.943
Unfolds Purpose well	3.136	4.295	1.159
Voice of personal significance without saying “I”	3.95	4.761 (.5114)	1.241
Creative with source materials	3.159	4.636	1.477

Finally, the two mentors who taught and graded this assignment rated aspects of the students’ Dance Perspective papers and the overall success and prediction of future success of these students with academic expository writing relating to texts and outside sources. The average of grades on final papers was 82.76%, which is a grade of a product, not the process the students evolved through. The scores of predicted future successes with this type of writing averaged together are 3.526, which, if converted from a Likert-type scale to a percentile is about 70%. Keep in mind that this is an attitude from the mentors only, but does reflect the level or amount of work the mentors had to commute to the students in order to achieve the final paper scores of 82.76%. See Table 4.

Discussion

Quite possibly the assignment and the teachers’ valuing of writing affects student valuing, which is what Pierre Bourdieu would call a shift in habitus or the attitude that is a normal part of that culture.¹³ Both students and chair feel high school and college give students what they need to produce academic writing, yet the chair feels students’ success level is below the level of support students received. Students clearly thought they are better at academic writing than their teachers did. Quite possibly students felt empowered a bit by this assignment because scores did go up by .48, almost a half point from their

Table 4 Mentors’ Assessment of Success and Future Success with Academic Writing

Category or Topic Assessed by Mentor	Ratings
Dance Perspectives assignment success overall	3.551
Overall expository ability of students	3.603
Prediction of future success with expository writing	3.397

before to their after scores. Students reported on average that they spent 1.40279 hours revising from the rough draft to the final version of the paper. This figure does not take into account that a few students processed through several drafts.

Rubric items that improved but were still low on final drafts were related to grammar and syntax. The score for grammar and syntax on the rough draft was not terribly low, but it was of some concern at 3.068. It only improved by .364 points, which indicates that our dancers were producing grammar and syntactical levels of a C-. This seems low and I believe could be attributed to amount of practice or knowledge with writing mechanics being low, or that dancers have not had, or have not allotted, sufficient time to reread and edit their work.

Rubric items that were at acceptable levels on rough drafts and improved strongly on final drafts were related to tactics to engage readers with relating to the audience, having a more scholarly voice, being creative with source materials, and knowing how to focus without having to be too personal with the “I” voice. This indicates that students understand the overall goal of writing and of writing this particular type of expository essay that incorporates outside sources.

The average grade for final papers came to 82.76%, which is a grade of a product, not the process the students evolved through. The scores of predicted future successes with this type of writing averaged together are 3.526, which, if converted from a Likert-type scale to a percentile is about 70%. Keep in mind that this is an attitude from the mentors only, but does reflect the level or amount of work the mentors had to commute to the students in order to achieve the final paper scores of 82.76%.

It must be emphasized that the study is only in its second year and only 45 participants have been studied. It is an exploratory study using both statistical and qualitative methods of action research. This document is merely noticing trends in data sets and explains them using qualitative descriptions. Three more groups of students will give enough data to start to capture statistical significance

between various data sets. Because action research requires ongoing analysis, outcomes from this study can be used to focus future research, teaching, and analysis.

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BIOGRAPHY

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