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“Professors all want different things” is a typical student comment in response to the diverse assignments and grading standards in different college classes. But does it also tell us something about the stage of intellectual maturity that student writers tend to go through? Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) specialists Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki think so. In *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*, they discover important changes that students experience as they encounter the various writing demands in higher education. Thaiss and Zawacki wanted to examine how both faculty and students perceive what it means to do “academic writing” and their findings are instructive.

Interestingly, they open the book with a story of how a group of faculty attending one of their workshops made them re-think their own assumptions about the qualities of “good” academic writing. Both Thaiss and Zawacki have been instrumental in the creation and success of the WAC program at George Mason University, so they have a fair amount of confidence in their familiarity with standards for written discourse. For a cross-disciplinary workshop in writing assessment, they had chosen four student papers (from four different majors but all in response to a similar assignment for a “review of the research”) which they felt represented the full range of proficiency. The workshop participants, however, reached very different conclusions about which paper was excellent and which was poor:

The “poor” paper, in our view, lacked organization, was short on evidence to support its thesis, and was marred in its effectiveness by errors in Standard Edited American English (SEAE) syntax and punctuation. The best paper, in our view, had a strong thesis, argued it with evidence from reliable sources, was clearly organized, and used SEAE with no errors. . . . To our surprise, the “poor” paper was judged by a plurality of the participants to be the best in the sample—because they regarded it as having the “freshest voice” and “taking the most risk” in its approach to the research—while they downgraded the “excellent” (in our view) paper as “conventional, saying nothing new even though competently written.” Where we had expected this mixed group of business, science, social science and humanities faculty to prioritize formal and logical properties usually invoked as defining academic prose, many of them had prioritized creative, personal criteria almost never named in lists of academic writing conventions. (1)

Their discussion of these ratings led them deeper into a maze they’d already entered in the early phase of their research for the book, namely, the interplay between “characteristics of academic writing and what might constitute alternatives—both acceptable and unacceptable” (2). They had already begun extensive interviews to get a picture of how their colleagues had become writers and, in particular, how they came to perceive what was “standard” in their field. Next they turned to students to explore how they had come to understand expectations for writing in their major. The results of their multi-year study have important implications not only for colleges seeking to establish WAC programs, but for all college faculty.

In examining faculty and student perceptions of both standard and alternative traits of effective academic writing, Thaiss and Zawacki re-affirm the central place of genre as an active, meaning-making process (not simply a form or structure), whose mastery allows writers to become members of a discourse community or discipline. Based on their extensive work with students, they observed three stages through which students tend to move as they approach disciplinary familiarity, and eventually, expertise:

In the first stage, the student uses very limited experience in academic writing, one or two courses perhaps, to build a general picture of “what all teachers expect.” If, for example, a composition teacher or textbook imposes a list of “dos and don’ts in college papers,” such lessons are apt to stick, especially in the absence of contrary experiences in the first year. In the second stage, more advanced students . . . move to a radically relativistic view (“They all want different things”) after they have encountered teachers’ differing methods, interests, and emphases. Students in this stage see teachers as idiosyncratic, not as conforming to disciplinary standards, and they are likely to feel confused and misled as teachers use the same terms to mean different things. . . . In the third stage, which not all students reach in their undergraduate years, the student uses the variety of courses in a major: the varying methods, materials, approaches, interests, vocabularies, etc., toward building a complex, but organic sense of the structure of a discipline. . . [and] a sense of coherence-within-diversity, understanding expectations as a rich mix of many ingredients.” (139)

I’d like to share some observations of my own on how sophomores and juniors here at TCNJ negotiate the sometimes confusing second stage of development. Early on in the semester, I frequently ask my students to write about their experiences writing college papers (in the fall semester only sophomores and juniors are enrolled in the class, not first-year students, so these are students with a little experience under their belts). What I’ve heard supports what Thaiss and Zawacki describe above. For example, one student described the puzzling experience of using the exact same process for writing two major papers in two different courses (one on evolutionary biology and one on immigration), and yet receiving a D- in one and an A- in the other. Moreover, the student felt far more confident about the paper that had received the D-. To him, this seemed like nothing more than the idiosyncratic differences between two professors.

Likewise, another student was initially confused by contrary results when he decided to use the same approach he’d learned for a poetry analysis in an anthropology paper. Interestingly, on further reflection he decided that his main error was trying to use reason and logic to understand human behavior (for the paper in anthropology). I’m sure his professor ***did*** want him to use reason and logic, but what he really means here is that living people are not the static depictions they may seem to be in literature, depictions one can nail down and say with exactitude are X or Y because the text says so. Another interesting detail is that this student called the anthropology assignment a “memoir-esque reflection paper,” when in fact it was an ethnographic observation. Clearly, he is still learning the genres in very different disciplines.

Finally, there is the student who got an F in a paper for an FSP because, as the professor explained, the language was “too wordy, too colorful . . . there was just too much going on for me.” Yet this student had been taught that writing comes from the heart, and indeed, the next semester she received an A on a paper in which she was praised for connecting with the topic, making it her own, and expressing her feelings about the situation being written about. This, however, was an introduction to journalism class. Again, genre and disciplinary standards may be more at the root of the problem here than the individual preferences of the faculty members, but the student is left without a broader understanding of what these might be.

In the next edition of the Bulletin, I’ll summarize Thais and Zawacki’s excellent recommendations for what faculty can do to help students successfully move through to stage three.