

# **The Great Divide: Differing Perceptions of Quality College-Level Writing Between Adult Learners and Adult Educators**

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*Abstract: Over the last eight years the writing specialists in an accelerated degree-completion program at the private, liberal arts, small Midwest University have observed a trend in students coming into the program with weaker and weaker writing skills. This trend led to the reconsideration of the program's required writing course, which was changed from assessment of prior learning to a more developmental English course. The findings reveal a great divide between adult educators and adult learners in their perceptions of quality college-level writing, and this split may explain the frustration of each group with the other.*

An instructor at Midwest University approached a writing specialist in the accelerated bachelor's degree-completion program with her frustration with what she saw as a break down between a particular student's ability to engage in in-depth classroom discussions and his ability to synthesize this information into required writing assignments. The writing specialist noted that the instructor's concern created a dilemma for her as she was left with no choice but to grade the poor written work accordingly. Yet, in doing so she realized that the student had demonstrated in the classroom a clear conceptual grasp of the material. But his final grade did not reflect his learning and growth in the subject.

This story is repeated in many adult learning contexts in which the instructor is left to assess students' critical thinking or communication abilities based mostly or sometimes solely on their writing. In particular, over the last eight years the writing specialists have observed a trend in students coming into their accelerated, bachelor's degree-completion program with weaker and weaker writing skills, both in content and structure. This trend led to the reconsideration of the program's required writing course, which was changed from assessment of prior learning to a more developmental English course. In order to evaluate whether this change was beneficial for the adult learners, this study was proposed by the writing specialists to explore both the theory and practice of learning and teaching writing in this particular context. This article reports on the question of what is quality college-level writing, which was asked of both adult learners and adult educators.

## **Rationale and Theoretical Framework**

Since the mid-1990s advocates of assessment reform have been arguing for alternative assessment practices such as performance-based assessment, portfolio-based assessment, and authentic assessment. These alternative practices, which rely on constructivist learning theory, differ from traditional assessment practices, which rely heavily on positivist learning theory. Education from a constructivist perspective is about assisting students in learning how to obtain knowledge and assessing that learning in the context of teaching, as opposed to a positivist perspective that advocates the transmission of "truths" about the real world and assessment of whether they have learned these "truths" mostly through objective tests (Anderson, 1998, pp. 5 – 7).

A common assumption of advocates of alternative assessment practices is that "[b]ehaviors and skills are not the goals of instruction; rather, the focus is on concept

development, deep understanding, and construction of active learner reorganization” (Anderson, 1998, p. 7). This assumption, however, implies that students in successful constructivist-based classrooms not only take responsibility for their learning but also have the critical thinking and writing skills. Yet, the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) asserts that “analyzing arguments and synthesizing information are . . . beyond the scope of most first-year students . . .” (p. 14). The Commission (2003) concludes that students can write, but not well (p.19), that is, fail to meet “the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment” (p. 19).

Over the past eight years, the writing specialists have observed that too many adult learners in their program could be described like the Commission’s report on freshmen. Their critical thinking and writing skills are often weak at best. Furthermore, program administrators and other faculty members have revealed much frustration and confusion with not only the poor quality of the adult learners’ writing, but also the inconsistency and difficulty in assessing that writing. One explanation for this situation may be the inconsistency between practices and theories in the assessment of writing. At the heart of this discourse is the assumption that assessment is the responsibility or authority of only adult educators. And that this assessment is often the same as grading or testing or an adult educator’s summative, generalized, rigid decision about an adult learner’s writing based upon a first draft or single paper. But for assessment to work well in the teaching and learning of writing, it must be assumed to be part of any literate act and to write well, not only adult educators, but also adult learners must be able to assess the writing well (Huot, 2002).

The results of a traditional view of assessment practices on adult learners’ writing show that they often think of writing as products, not process. “Writing papers for a grade creates a role for the student in which assessing the value of writing is secondary or moot and the attainment of a specific grade is everything” (Huot, 2002, p. 168). Being able to assess writing quality and to know what works in any particular writing situation are important tools for all writers. So until adult educators “. . . teach students how to assess, [they] fail to provide them with the authority inherent in assessment, continuing the disjuncture between the competing roles of student and writer” (Huot, 2002, p. 169).

Within this framework of assessment and its usual positivist role in the teaching and learning of writing, the writing specialists proposed a study with the intention of learning whether there was any agreement between what adult learners believed quality college-level writing was and what the adult educators thought it was. Since “quality” is such a difficult word to define, the writing specialists believed that the definition should emerge from the stakeholders themselves. Thus, their theories about the teaching and learning of quality college-level writing would be informed not only by other practitioners and scholars, but also by the program’s own adult learners’ and adult educators’ experience and knowledge. These theories could then be applied to the existing writing curriculum either by upholding it or by revising it.

## **Methodology**

This study used qualitative methodology in a context of two undergraduate degree-completion major groups (i.e., Family Life Education (FLE) and Management and Organizational Development (MOD)) in four regions (i.e., North, West, East, and Central). The participants included third-semester (i.e., final semester) adult learners in the two programs and faculty who taught in that same semester. As students in a bachelor’s degree-completion

program, the adult learners had completed at least 58 undergraduate credits from accredited post-secondary institutions. They entered essentially at a junior level and should have had a basic grasp of quality college level writing from the start of their program.

The data source was a two-question survey. The study's primary research question was, How do adult learners and adult educators in the third semester of an accelerated, degree-completion program define acceptable or quality college-level writing? The secondary question for adult learners was, Do you believe you have achieved the level of college writing you have defined, and for adult educators it was, What percentage of learners do you perceive as meeting the standard you have defined? In total, 165 out of 170 student surveys and 58 out of 71 faculty surveys, which all met the study criteria, were used for the data analysis. This analysis was done through an iterative cycle of constant comparative methodology until all themes were revealed.

## **Findings**

The data analysis revealed definitions or descriptions of quality college-level writing from both the adult learners' and the adult educators' perspective. It also showed the degree to which both groups believed that their standards or expectations for quality college-level writing had been met. The educators and learners all agreed that writing, as with learning in general, is both an outcome (i.e., product or document) and a process (i.e., a way to achieve the outcome or product). Beyond that point, however, there was much disagreement about the topic.

### ***Definitions of Acceptable Writing***

In particular, two themes seemed to resonate in the learners' responses: 1) APA style use (the learners overwhelmingly equated proper APA style use as tantamount to acceptable college-level writing); 2) grammar, punctuation, and syntax use. About the first theme, the scenario from the learners' perspective varied with their program; that is, FLE students appeared more likely to be critical of their for not providing enough support to assist them in weak areas of writing, and MOD students were more likely to complain about an inconsistency of APA style use or grading by instructors.

For example, several FLE students did not respond to the questionnaire at all, but used it as an opportunity to complain about the poor support system that the program provided for help in writing. They all made similar comments about the need for assistance. For example, one student commented: "College level writing, to me, includes additional assistance for students that are struggling with their endeavor (stet) of writing the many assigned paper (stet). The school tution (stet) is to (stet) high for one to go outside of the college for help. The college needs to have more than one writing specialist."

Some common responses among the educators were as follows: Minimal problems with grammar, punctuation, and spelling; evidence of having engaged in some degree of critical thinking; evidence of having made connections to classroom learning and everyday life (i.e., cross application); evidence of a clearly defined thesis statement and proper APA style formatting. Because of the tendency for mechanical issues to be mentioned early in most educators' responses, it could be assumed that a paper containing more than a few such problems would begin to lose its value as a potential "A" paper. Moreover, there was an implied frustration about this problem, considering how frequently it was mentioned.

Furthermore, the educators' responses indicated that the learners' critical thinking skills or having "thought through" the course concepts must be evident in their papers. That is, the

papers should communicate in a logical manner, and thus in value its structure seemed to be as important, if not more important, as grammar and punctuation. For instance, one educator stated this requirement as follows: “[To have quality college-level writing there must be] evidence of higher/in depth thought and analysis of the material as opposed to *shallow* or *surface* thinking.” Following references to critical thinking, the educators often mentioned that quality college-level writing must also offer illustrations of connections between course content and the learners’ everyday experience. These responses suggested that students who have weaknesses in technical areas, but could demonstrate critical thinking and cross application were assessed as effective writers by the instructors.

### ***Adult Learners’ Perceptions of Achievement of Quality College-level Writing***

Yet, to the second part of the survey about whether they believed that they had achieved their definition of acceptable or quality college-level writing by the end of their program, only 59 percent of the 165 learners’ responses were positive. Twelve percent were negative. Besides two who failed to respond at all, other responses included: “on occasion; close”; “yes, however, much of my learning came from other sources”; “[the program] should offer more options for learning writing skills”; “I believe I still have a lot to learn, not because of school, but because of my inability to grasp it. A refresher course would have been nice since I haven’t been in college for 7 years”; “not yet, but I’m working on it. I don’t feel the structures offered a lot of help with writing. They expect our [papers] to be “college-level” yet aren’t real specific on what they desire. I believe that I had this level of college writing before I came to [the program]. I don’t think the writing class and subsequent writing I have had have improved my writing”; “I was a writer when I began so have always known how and done well”; “yes, I’m working on it—not arrived yet—stay tuned”; “yes, I have achieved college level writing but not from [the program]. I had to seek outside assistance”; “All of the writing practice sharpened my skills, but they were already developed”; “yes, with critical ‘peramiters’”; “yes and no, depends on instructor. In the middle”; “I’m getting there.”

In sum, those learners who perceived that they had achieved the ability to write well at a college level felt that they had learned this skill before coming into the accelerated degree-completion program. Those who were less confident in their ability to write well at a college level, with one exception, tended to blame the program for its lack of writing assistance or the instructors for their lack of clear directions.

### ***Educators’ Perceptions of Percentage of Achievement of Quality College-Level Writing***

Twenty-seven instructors responded to the second part of their survey about what percentage of their students met their definition of acceptable or quality college-level writing. Their responses ranged as low as 30 percent and as high as 90 percent. Seventeen responses fell within the 60 – 90 percent range, and the other 10 estimated that 50 percent or less of their students failed to achieve their definition of college-level writing. One educator commented about what he did to brief his writing assignments and how successful he thought that method was: “Fifty percent I would estimate that all tolled; 75 % of the papers I have graded have earned a “B” or higher (meet or exceed my three criteria for acceptable college-level writing). I would also say that I have gone out of my way to discuss my expectations and the requirements for papers often for each class. I emphasize that most of their grade is based on the quality of their papers. I want to make sure that every student understands what is required and what I expect. I describe examples of poor and excellent writing. For me, a student’s paper is the

“crown jewel” of their (stet) course work. I want students to know that and plan to write accordingly (MOD instructor, West Region).”

In sum, even though more educators felt that most of their learners met their definition or requirements for quality college-level writing, a significant number (37 percent) felt that only half of their students achieved quality college-level writing.

## Discussion

These findings provide evidence of the great divide between adult learners and adult educators in their perceptions of quality college-level writing. This gap seems to be between what adult educators expect and what adult learners bring to the classroom. The evidence shows that too often adult learners lack critical thinking or evaluative skills that results in unsuccessful and demoralizing learning experiences; for example, the Family Life Education student who, even at the end of her program defined quality college-level writing as including “additional assistance for students that are struggling with their endeavor (stet) of writing the many assigned paper (stet).” The implication here is the student either felt little control or took little responsibility for her own writing. She seems to lack confidence in her ability to produce or assess quality college-level writing. And, according to the study, she is not alone with more than 40 percent of the respondents stating that they did not believe in their ability to achieve quality college-level writing. Furthermore, the adult educators affirm this finding with 37 percent saying that only 50 percent of their learners achieve acceptable or quality college-level writing.

One explanation for this missing link between the teaching and learning of writing is the perpetuation of a positivist theory of assessment. That is, it is the adult educators’ sole responsibility to assess their students’ writing and that assessment is done in the same way as grading a test—summarily and final. And in the accelerated bachelor’s degree-completion program it is done on one paper that is often valued as 60 percent of the learner’s final course grade. Huot (2002) posits that this traditional view of writing assessment often results in adult learners’ thinking about writing as more product than process. However, this view, as evidenced by these findings, often leads to adult educators’ frustration with their perception of their students’ inability to write at a college level and the adult learners’ frustration with their perception of inconsistent instruction (particularly about APA style) and a weak support system that offers no writing labs or tutors. One example of the latter is the Family Life Education student who thought all students who did “not possess the skills necessary to write effectively . . . should have more writing/English staff available to help [them] remain successful.” She also recommended an English/writing learning lab with “the cost expended on more support . . . made up in student retention in the various programs.”

Yet, the program is clearly designed for those adult learners who are supposed to know how to write as juniors and seniors in college, well beyond the freshman level that the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) reported could write, but not well. For example, as one educator said, “I have gone out of my way to discuss my expectations and requirements for papers often for each class.” Yet, he estimated that only 50 percent of his students met them. On most grading scales, that percentage represents failure. But who has failed—the teacher or the students?

The evidence points to frustration and blame on both sides of this question. Nevertheless, one missing link that might unite both parties would be more awareness and rethinking of their positivist frame of reference about the teaching and learning of writing. As Nelson (1983) says,

“A product-oriented, preventive/corrective, error-avoidance approach [to the teaching and learning of writing is] an approach with a built-in, self-fulfilling prophecy of failure for teachers and their students” (p. 56). She suggests that writing should be “process-based and process perpetuating,” but include “attention to products at appropriate states” (p. 56).

Huot (2002) advocates a constructivist theory of writing assessment in which it is thought of as a way to teach and learn writing, using three forms of evaluation by the adult educators: summative (given at the end of the writing process); formative (given along the way of the writing process); and instructive (given along the way of the writing process to help learners evaluate “how well their current drafts match the linguistic and rhetorical targets they have set for themselves . . .”). The adult learners could begin rethinking their ideas about writing assessment by evaluating samples of writing and creating lists of what makes good writing and how to recognize it (p. 170).

### Implications

Supported by the study’s data, there seems to be an impasse as to who is responsible—educators or learners—for the less than acceptable or quality college-level writing that has been observed by the writing specialists in the accelerated bachelor’s degree-completion program . But how this standoff might be resolved requires further research. Whether rethinking the approach to the teaching and learning of college writing will make a difference is a question for further research and is the intent of the next phase of this study. As Huot ((2002) says, “Just as we have had to rethink the teaching of writing as a process, we also need to rethink what it means for our students to evaluate the way writing works and to relate these decisions about writing quality to the process of writing itself” (p. 170). This rethinking seems to begin with study and discourse about assessment and what it means to the teaching and learning of writing in higher education. Hopefully, it will mean less frustration and blame from both educators and learners.

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