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PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC WRITING FROM FIRST GENERATION
NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
in the Department of Higher Education
The University of Mississippi

by

MARGARET JEANINE RAUCH

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ABSTRACT

Across the country, many students struggle with writing making it a national concern for society to find a solution to resolve this issue. By understanding how first generation non-traditional students perceive their own writing, educators and administrators can provide the resources to help these students achieve their academic goals. It is imperative that educators and administrators be aware of this social issue of concern and try to find the best means to help eradicate it. Higher education affords students the opportunity to become critical thinkers, command their own voices, and express their ideas. This dissertation is comprised of three manuscripts for the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). This first manuscript will cover the history and nature of the problems that first generation non-traditional students face in higher education when dealing with their own writing level and skills. The second manuscript will showcase the data collected from interviews with non-traditional first generation students and their perceptions of academic writing. The third manuscript will explain the results and possible solutions and suggestions to help remedy the concerns of academic writing.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| ABSTRACT..... | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iii |
| LIST OF TABLES..... | vii |
| MANUSCRIPT ONE..... | 1 |
| Identification of the Problem of Practice..... | 2 |
| Problem of Practice in Local Context..... | 3 |
| Professional Positionality and Assumptions about the Problem of Practice..... | 7 |
| Contextualization of the Problem of Practice within a Conceptual Framework..... | 14 |
| Next Steps..... | 29 |
| MANUSCRIPT TWO..... | 31 |
| Introduction to the Problem of Practice..... | 32 |
| Summary of the Problem of Practice and Dissertation in Practice..... | 34 |
| Research questions..... | 35 |
| Definition of terms..... | 36 |
| Data Overview..... | 38 |
| Limitations..... | 40 |
| Presentations of Findings..... | 42 |
| Preparedness of Academic Writing..... | 43 |
| Perception of Academic Writing..... | 47 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Use of On-site Campus Resources Utilized..... | 51 |
| Discussion and Implications..... | 53 |
| Summary of Findings..... | 57 |
| Next Steps..... | 59 |
| MANUSCRIPT THREE..... | 61 |
| Problem of Practice..... | 62 |
| Summary of Findings..... | 66 |
| Improving Practices to Enhance Equity, Ethics, and Social Justice..... | 69 |
| Resources for Implementation and Recommendations..... | 71 |
| Practitioner Reflection..... | 75 |
| Dissemination of Findings..... | 79 |
| Summary of Manuscript..... | 80 |
| REFERENCES..... | 84 |
| APPENDIX..... | 91 |
| VITA..... | 95 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Pseudonyms..... | 40 |
| 2. Themes and Codes for Academic Writing..... | 43 |
| 3. Preparedness for Academic Writing..... | 43 |
| 4. Perception of Academic Writing..... | 47 |
| 5. Use of On-site Campus Resources Utilized..... | 51 |
| 6. Pseudonyms..... | 68 |

MANUSCRIPT ONE

Identification of the Problem of Practice

Higher education serves as a vessel that allows individuals to explore various opportunities which will help shape their lives. Students attending institutions of higher education need to possess strong writing and communication skills to project their thoughts and ideas clearly and cohesively. Without these writing and communication skills, their views and ideas will not be heard. Students who are struggling with writing are faced with challenges which follow them not only in their educational classes, but in their careers. In Higher Education, it is important to be aware of how many non-traditional students are struggling with writing. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011), by knowing how crucial it is to understand the obstacles non-traditional students face when entering into college and be attune to the low retention rates of these students, educators and administrators can be more prepared to remedy these issues (Grabowski, Rush, Ragen, Fayard, & Watkins-Lewis, 2016). Knowing that the skill of writing is a social issue of concern for students who attend colleges and universities, it is imperative that educators facilitate writing strategies that will help the productivity for these individuals.

Educators and administrators in higher education need to find ways to increase writing proficiency specifically for first generation non-traditional students. The president of the University of Maryland University College, Susan C. Aldridge, believes that, “universities also need to recognize that adult students bring different expectations to the teaching and learning experience...adult students have an experiential focus. ‘They want to apply the knowledge that

they have gained in their education to their work environment in order to enhance their career right away” (as cited in Pelletier, 2010, p. 5-6). It is important to reduce the fear and apprehension of academic writing in first generation non-traditional students, so they can be better prepared for college level writing in all courses. By obtaining good writing and communication skills throughout higher education, a student enhances their individual success and confidence.

The Problem of Practice is focused on how first generation non-traditional students perceive their own academic writing skills as it pertains to their success in college. This study will identify the population of first generation non-traditional students and discuss what constitutes academic writing. Manuscript two will examine interviews that were conducted with first generation non-traditional students attending a public university off-campus instructional site on how they define and perceive academic writing in the college setting. Manuscript three will explain how educators and administrators can assist with these writing concerns. Ultimately, on-campus resources, such as the writing center, can assist in a proactive means to help alleviate these concerns in the future.

Problem of Practice in Local Context

The problem of practice is how first generation non-traditional students perceive their own academic writing at a public university off-campus instructional site. It is important to understand why academic writing is a problem at the university level. Faculty and administrators who understand the purpose and meaning of academic writing at the university level can better assist the needs of these students. In all academic courses, the writing that is required from each discipline has its own format, contextual analysis, along with critical thinking skills. Furthermore, academic writing harbors “close readings of annotated texts or segments of

texts...[in which to] reflect upon in order to understand the complexities and nuances of the cultural context of the discipline and its current written forms” (Bastalich, Behrend, & Bloomfield, 2014, p. 375). In academic writing, each discipline requires a deeper understanding of the audience that is affected within its discourse community. Students who grasp this understanding of their own discipline can think more in-depth about how they would use the knowledge gained from their classes to help resolve issues that might pose concern once they are in their respective field of study. Students who understand these concepts of academic writing are more inclined to construct clear and well-developed essays.

Many faculty and administrators are getting more accustomed to having a student body composed of non-traditional students. “Trending rapidly...toward a wave of ‘non-traditional’ aged (25+) students, featuring displaced workers, first-generation college attendees, returning students, and those who desire a change in career (either due to financial hardship or preference), administrators have no choice but to alter collegiate curriculums, services, and overall philosophies” (Jesnek, 2012, p. 2). First generation students are also becoming visible to some university campuses. At a public university off-campus instructional site located in the southern part of the United States both first generation and non-traditional students are faced with challenges upon entering into the college setting, especially after years of being away from the institution. These students who express genuine concern for improving their own personal writing skills can choose to seek assistance and guidance to improve their writing. If these students do not seek the proper assistance to help them improve their own writing skills, factors of low confidence and performance levels can occur, as well as withdrawing from class instruction. This type of behavior in college can quickly lead to grade failure and in turn can lead to dropping out of the university altogether. “In 1987, Vincent Tinto proposed the dynamic

Model of Institutional Departure, stating that the student retention process is clearly dependent on the student's institutional experiences" (Lau, 2003, p. 127). It is imperative that educators become more aware of each of their student's success and drive within their class. Educators who understand that "students who have negative interactions and experiences tend to become disillusioned with college, withdraw from their peers and faculty members, and ultimately, the institution" (Lau, 2003, p. 127). When educators create an engaging and enjoyable learning environment, students tend to be more receptive to the material being taught. "One process involves motivational effects because learning that makes sense tends also to be more enjoyable" (Calais, 2008, p. 33). Educators who encourage their students within the classroom notice a higher achievement and drive within their students. "[L]earners...are encouraged to self-explain process information more deeply than if self-explanation were not involved. Increased time spent actively thinking about the task...is likely to be more successful if learners engage" (Calais, 2008, p. 34). This tactic is important for educators to understand because it highlights how students who are involved in their own learning process will be more likely to succeed in their own academic careers. A statement made by Peter Collier and David Morgan (2008) emphasized that "[m]astering the college student role enables young people to understand their instructors' expectations and to apply their existing skills to meet those expectations successfully" (p. 425-426). All students who are invested in their college courses, no matter their classification will be more likely to succeed and gain that knowledge of their chosen field.

Educators and administrators need to be aware of first generation non-traditional students' level of their academic performance upon entering into college. As stated in research conducted by Gail Markle (2015):

One third of American undergraduate students enrolled in 2011 were considered non-traditional students as defined by the single criterion of age being 25 years and older....For the period 2008 to 2019, enrollment of students aged 25 to 34 years and older is expected to increase 28% and 22% respectively, compared to 12% for students aged 18 to 24 years. (pp. 267-268)

This information alone defines the urgency of paying more attention to the needs of these students. Taylor and House (2010) proclaim:

the number of students going to university from lower socio-economic groups had risen by nearly 10,000 from 2002/03, to nearly 63,700 in 2007/08...state school entrants have increased from 81 percent in 1997/98 to 87 percent in 2007/08; and participation from those coming from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) rose from 11.4 percent in 2002/03 to 13.5 percent in 2005/06. (p. 47)

These numbers show the rapid increase of non-traditional students, which has caused educators and administrators to be aware of how this will impact the way in which curriculum is taught within the classroom. Educators who are more aware of the writing concerns that these first generation non-traditional students face, can be better equipped to direct them to the necessary resources on campus that can ensure adequate services to rectify these concerns.

In reviewing the academic performance of non-traditional students, some researchers have conducted studies that further explain the importance of learning styles and environments within the classroom. "According to Siegler (2002), a major challenge facing educational establishments centers on the need to design pedagogical procedures that are instructionally effective" (as cited in Calais, 2008, p. 29). Educators who place more emphasis on creating a better learning environment to help the students achieve during their college years is essential. In

recent studies, writing has shown as a skill that is not well developed from all classifications of students. “[S]tudents from K-12 to graduate school do not have adequate writing skills...a recent national assessment of student writing showed that 88% of 8th graders and 82% of 12th graders score only the basic level...students bring these inadequate writing skills with them to college” (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2016, p. 160). The context of this issue stems from the number of non-traditional students attending college versus the number of traditional students. Professors and instructors need to be aware that “A vast majority of ...students are returning to school after a ten to twenty year hiatus from the classroom (Jesnek, 2012, p. 3). The rise in first generation non-traditional students attending college needs the attention of professors and instructors who are willing to scaffold educational instruction to help close any learning gaps that may be visible.

Professional Positionality and Assumptions about the Problem of Practice

Writing Background

Growing up in south Texas, language became a big part of my cultural upbringing. It afforded me the opportunity to understand and appreciate various cultures and backgrounds. Living in an area where both English and Spanish were spoken, I witnessed many people struggle with the correct way to write and speak. It is in this venue that I truly acknowledged the importance of respecting the diverse cultures and beliefs of others.

Always having a true passion for writing and the English language, it never really crossed my mind to become a teacher. Although I do come from a long line of teachers in my family, I never really thought about teaching college. It was only until I was in my undergraduate senior year that I truly became more inquisitive about the profession of my own instructors. Their daily lectures and discussions seemed so interesting and engaging that I began to ask questions about their job and their own interest in the field they taught. After graduating college, I held various

jobs but never felt like I was truly honing in on my talents and passion. It was during this time that I decided to return to school and obtain a Master's degree.

Teaching Composition

While pursuing my Master's degree at Delta State University, I served as a graduate assistant and writing center consultant. It was in these roles that I knew I had a talent for teaching and helping others find joy in writing. I was able to eliminate their frustrations when writing. Upon receiving my Master's degree, I was excited to discover that an opening for a teaching position was available at Alcorn State University, a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). This was my first experience teaching at the college level. I can remember my feelings of both excitement and nervousness as I entered the classroom. I just kept telling myself that I will treat my class the way I would want to be treated and teach them the way I would want to be taught.

This experience teaching at an HBCU afforded me the opportunity to work in a writing center. It was in this working environment that I felt my passion for writing, language, and the joy of helping others come together. I had found my calling. For four years, I worked and developed my own skills as an English instructor helping my students understand the complexities of literature and finding the joys of reading and writing.

A position soon opened at The University of Mississippi DeSoto Regional Campus that merged together a job that included directing a writing center and teaching writing. After applying and accepting this position. It is in this environment where I truly flourished.

In my current position, I serve a dual role of both regional writing center director and instructor. As an instructor, my goal is to provide opportunities for students to grow and expand in their understanding of research writing. In teaching WRIT 250 Advanced Composition to

juniors and seniors, I have learned that they are lacking critical writing skills such as understanding academic articles, developing a clear claim, and critical thinking skills as it relates to creating an argument for their research topic. I want my students to feel confident and secure in their ability to complete an assignment. Teaching traditional, first generation, non-traditional students, English language learners (ELL), and those students who have not taken a writing class in more than five years, brings its own challenges. Finding ways to connect students with resources whether in the writing center or on our regional campus, has made me realize that having both patience and compassion for these students is very important to their ultimate success.

While serving in this dual role, I have found that the skills I use as a Writing Center director in facilitating tutorial sessions enables me to better identify the skills needed by students in my classroom. I routinely work with students whose first language is not English, first generation, non-traditional, traditional, and students with learning disabilities. This enables me to incorporate my background from where I grew up, my passion for writing and learning new skills. I enjoy helping students explore the pleasures of learning and finding new meaning behind their own written work.

Engaging Instruction

Keeping students engaged through clarity and applicability is imperative to ensure that they use the skills that they are taught. By placing my own creative spin on a writing lesson, students are then able to realize that research writing and writing in general can be enjoyable. Small group activities where writing is now collaborative instead of being isolated helps improve discussion and thoughts on an issue. Having open discussion of shared ideas with the class and

then having group discussion about these thoughts helps students see the benefits of collaboration and learning together.

Assumptions

While teaching advanced composition for seven years now at the university regional campus, I feel that still more students are expressing their frustrations with their own writing skills and feel under prepared for the level of work expected at the university level compared to the community college level. Higher order thinking is required and more knowledge of various formatting styles are needed to be known. For example Modern Language Arts (MLA) is not the only format style that professors are requiring of their students. American Psychological Association (APA) and Chicago Manual Style (CMS) are also a necessity. As a practitioner of writing, I am curious about how non-traditional students view or perceive their own writing skills upon entering into the advanced writing composition course I teach.

Teaching first generation, non-traditional students, English language learners (ELL), and those students who have not taken a writing class in more than five years, brings its own challenges. Within this advanced composition course, I am responsible for teaching students the skills they need to conduct research within their own field of study. Having the writing center on campus has been an essential place conducive for learning that supports the writing needs of students. Although these resources provide additional support for my instruction, students are still expressing their own writing concerns and confusion in regards to formatting in APA style. It is with these concerns that I began to question whether or not these students understand how to find resources to help rectify these concerns on their own, or if they are suffering from a learning gap from writing courses taken in the past that was not closed when transitioning into college.

While employed as both an instructor of writing and the writing center director on this regional campus, I service a variety of stakeholders: students, faculty, administrators, and staff. This particular regional campus community is unique. The building itself houses two institutions, a regional community college and a regional university. Students who attend the community college can either graduate with an associate's degree or continue their education to complete a four year degree through the university. Student stakeholders consist of those who are transitioning from a community college into the university.

Administrators, staff, and faculty stakeholders rely on my dual role of writing instruction and writing center director management for this regional campus. Providing free tutorial services to the students as well as in-class workshops for faculty helps to promote a student service that enhances the quality of student education. This service promotes student retention rates and higher graduation rates. As institutions evaluate ways to make a positive change for students in the future it is imperative for administrators, faculty, and staff to work together to improve retention rates. According to Vincent Tinto (1987), "institutions rethink traditional ways of structuring collegiate learning environments and find new ways of actively involving students, as well as faculty, in their intellectual life. It requires a deeper understanding of the importance of educational community to the goals of higher education" (p. 212). Along with Vincent Tinto, "psychologist Diane Ruble (1994) offers a model that ties developmental change to life transitions such as going to college. Transitions are significant because they present new situations about which individuals know little and in which they will experience uncertainty" (as cited in Harper & Jackson, 2011, p. 252). The more awareness administrators and faculty can give to this issue, the more inclined higher education will see a change for growth in the population of students.

As an educator, I also need to possess the skills and tools to help facilitate deeper thinking and encourage new ideas and thoughts from students. By showing the importance of real-life applications of these required assignments, I believe they are much better prepared for the job market. John Dewey states, “The sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter into the heart, head and hands of educators, and which by entering in, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more human, more truly educational than it was before” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). This statement truly identifies the progressive nature of educators and education itself as our world continues to evolve and adapt to our environment. I believe I accomplish this objective by giving my students plenty of time on task activities with monitored guidance when they learn a new skill.

In addition to practicing these skills, meeting with each student for a one-on-one appointment to discuss the details of the assignment is helpful in their productivity as a writer. I sincerely believe that as a teacher, I want to make certain that my students are being reached at the level of their understanding. My role as an educator is to provide opportunities for students to grow and expand in their understanding of the material being taught.

The students I teach all have very different academic backgrounds. Teaching to the more common non-traditional students and those students with critical writing skills brings its own challenges. Having this opportunity has allowed me to develop techniques to adjust my teaching so that I can reach all of my students. “From the field of philosophy, John Dewey and his followers in the field of education argued for the primacy of experience in education, promoting course instruction based on projects, field work, and inquiry, all relevant to the student, rather than memorization and recitation” (Harper & Jackson, 2011, p. 115). Adhering to my philosophy

of education to this principle thought, I feel that I am able to address the writing concerns of my students which allows me to reevaluate my own teaching approach.

Serving as the regional campus writing center director, I train my writing consultants to guide students in the right direction so that they will become better writers. Writing consultants give both constructive and positive feedback to those students who use the writing center which results in a more confident student who is secure in their own writing ability. It truly is a privilege to have the Writing Center as an additional resource to help my students get the one-on-one attention they need to succeed.

One of my primary goals as a teacher is to communicate clearly with each student. Setting aside time to help students with specific questions has been very helpful when teaching research writing. Dewey attests to the fact that “The object of foresight of consequences is not to predict the future. It is to ascertain the meaning of present activities and to secure, so far as possible, a present activity with a unified meaning” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Students who are more connected with their own writing ability and see the value of process writing are better able to develop themselves as a stronger writer.

Development of Assumptions

Being aware of the unique needs of the students on the regional campus, I conduct individualized conferences with my students throughout the semester. These conferences allow me to better assist their writing needs throughout this research writing course. Meeting with each student for a one-on-one conference to discuss the details of the assignment is helpful in their productivity as a writer.

Teaching students who struggle with finding their own voice does present its own challenges, but it is my goal to instill confidence within them, so that they can remove their fear

of writing. While serving this dual role of writing instructor and writing center director, I have found that the skills I use as director in facilitating tutorial sessions in the writing center, enables me to better identify the skills necessary to rectify specific writing needs to those students in my classroom.

As I reflect on my years teaching writing at the college level, I have come to realize that in the task of writing, students truly learn by doing. Each semester, I continue to hone my own research writing skills and strive to be creative, so that I will have a fresh approach to teaching the joys of writing. Being a lifelong learner, I will continue to research innovative and creative ways of engaging my students in the writing process so that they can reach their full potential.

Contextualization of the Problem of Practice within a Conceptual Framework

Writing and communication help to articulate thoughts and expression of ideas that create changes in society for either better or worse. It is critically important to develop a method for evaluating students' performance. One of the most effective ways for evaluating students' understanding of the material being taught is through written communication. Writing and communication are the means by which a student is able to express their ideas and thoughts about an issue taught.

Across the country, many students struggle with writing making it a national concern for society to find a solution to resolve this issue. Educators and administrators need to be aware of this social issue of concern and try to find the best means to help eradicate it. More non-traditional students are attending colleges and universities. There is an inconsistent level of writing skills among these students and it is important to help rectify this issue so that they are ensured a strong education so that they can pursue higher education goals along with employment goals. Higher education affords students the opportunity to become critical thinkers,

command their own voices, and express their ideas. Writing and communication help to articulate thoughts and expression of ideas that create changes in society for either better or worse. It is critically important to develop a method for evaluating students' performance. Writing and communication are the means by which a student is able to express their ideas and thoughts about an issue taught.

Scholarly Literature Review and Communities of Professional Practice

Students who are transferring from a community college to a university need to be assured that their transfer experience is a productive one. Educators and administrators in higher education need to be in tune with this notion as it does affect the progressive nature of current students' educational path to success. For those students who are transferring from a community college to a university, it is important to note that “[a]rtificial barriers’ in college policies and procedures may be interfering with the smooth transition of transfer students....Curricular barriers to successful transfer include conditions that create confusion and difficulty with respect to transferability of courses” (Cuseo, 2001, p. 7). This is just one example of how crucial it is to consider the curriculum and the barriers that come with it as an issue of concern in helping transfer students achieve their academic goals.

Universities must acknowledge the importance of making a smooth transition possible for students. It is important to create clear curriculum materials to educate society, so that they are better prepared for career opportunities. Another aspect educators and administrators need to be aware of is that some students who attend community college and transfer to a university mainly consist of the minority population. Knowing that a population of minority students are transferring into college, the equality and access for all students needs to be noted. As stated by Rendon and Garza (1996), “underrepresentation of minorities in the share of baccalaureate

degrees earned and the fact that earning the bachelor's degree is to a large extent contingent on minorities successfully transferring from two-to four-year institutions...the imperative to increase transfer rates of minority students is a national concern" (as cited in Cuseo, 2001, p. 6-7). Additional success programs that provide educational access for all students in the form of on-campus educational success outlets help increase the retention rate and eliminate the confusion of transferring from one institution to another.

Universities and community colleges need to work together to better understand the needs of their student population. Pascarella and Terezini (1991) claim that "[f]ailure on the part of educators and public policymakers to acknowledge that two-year and four-year colleges do not lead to the same set of educational and economic outcomes and failure to act on that recognition will mean that unequal educational opportunity will continue, not in the opportunities to participate in higher education but in the opportunities to reap the full benefits of participation" (as cited in Cuseo, 2001, p. 7). Institutions that do not address this fact are doing a disservice to students. The idea of "American core values—a concern for the notions of publicness, for equal access and opportunity, equality, and autonomy" is underscored as an important point to be looked at as the goal of higher education (Giroux & Giroux, 2007, p. 28). Students need to be educated. They need to embrace their own views and thoughts, and execute their ideas when they enter into the workforce. Community colleges and universities both require academic success from their students and in doing so, they need to be aware of how innovative ideas and programs implemented can help remedy social issues of concern. Higher education values follow in line with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) principles which focus on social justice, ethics, and equity. By developing a clear understanding of the

importance of these three concepts, educators can uplift students of any classification to become their best and achieve their desired goals.

CPED First Principles

Social Justice

Students who are accountable for their academic contributions in classes show value and meaning to the productivity of their work. In *Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals*, author David Labaree explains how higher education is viewed through a social efficiency lens. He states that the “social efficiency approach to schooling argues that our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence” (Labaree, 1997, p. 42). Understanding this important aspect of the value of higher education, it is essential for educators and administrators to create particular attention to writing and communication from students so that they can become effective workers in society. Assessing writing across their institutions has allowed for a better understanding of the struggles and successes of students’ needs and concerns to their academic career as it pertains to writing. Writing is ultimately clear thinking and clear thinking allows for clear solutions and resolutions for societal problems. Without writing and communication skills, society’s future will lack a critical skill that is imperative for the country to succeed as a whole.

Higher education has a way of impacting class and social mobility. In William Barratt’s (2011) article, *Social Class on Campus: Theories and Manifestations*, he explains that “[o]rganizational structures are one of the ways college reproduces social class...” and then further expresses that it is important to have a hierarchy of when it comes to “more power, prestige, money, and class because your work role defines your social class” (p. 94). Higher

education holds a responsibility to allow various classes to be explored. Administrators and educators can help to create opportunities for students to explore differing viewpoints and class structures on campus. When a student experiences these different avenues of social groups, their ideas change and the way they look at the world around them is now viewed with a new set of eyes. Being exposed to different cultures and different class structures on a college campus, allows students to explore, learn, and grow within their community. This opportunity is so beneficial to the development of an individual in how they take in differences and interact with populations that they are not accustomed to being around. Higher education creates an avenue for the student upon entering into the workforce. Individuals who have never extended their education in a higher educational setting, can sometimes lack a social or constructive skill that would otherwise have been taught and developed had they explored options in furthering their education. In the article by Grusky and Ku (2007), they mention views which “argue that working-class culture is disparaging of educational investments...because such investments expose the working class (more so than other classes) to a real risk of downward mobility” (p. 10). Looking at this point from a social mobility lens and also of the critical theory perspective, honing in on one class structure to hold the weight of the world is very problematic. Critical theorists would suggest that many different classes need to work together to address this problem of imbalance of social economic structures. Rebuilding and reshaping this problem would alleviate the burden of working class citizens and help eliminate their downward spiral. Being able to remark on issues of importance, enhances an individual’s self-assuredness. A society that shares its unique ideas can help empower the outlook of their community. It changes people’s lives. Critical social issues faced in higher education cannot be addressed effectively without having individuals who are able to express themselves and their ideas clearly.

The ultimate achievement of social efficiency is acquiring these advanced writing and communication skills to help produce a well working society. Higher education serves as a conduit to promote successful citizens. In Labaree's (1997) article, he further explores the value of social efficiency as providing an education to students that enhance skills needed in a workforce which provide a "steady supply of employees" (p. 47). Without having the ability to articulate new ideas in written form, students limit their potential for success in the workplace. Understanding the need for balance in democratic values and students' own personal value of obtaining an education is the role of higher education. As the productivity of society is constantly evolving, it is imperative to help produce effective and well-educated students to understand this progression. Authors David Grusky and Manwai Ku (2007), express "it cannot easily be reconciled with evidence suggesting that the computerization of the workplace and related technology change has been at least one force behind a heightened demand for highly educated workers" (p. 24). As society continues to grow, the use of technology is becoming more and more prevalent as a tool to increase productivity and facilitate communication and social connections. It is critical that students who are graduating with their higher education degrees be knowledgeable about how to use and understand various technological applications as it will be used throughout their career. Educators and administrators have a responsibility to educate students to be prepared for the workforce upon their graduation.

Ethics

Students who are a product of higher education become critical thinkers and own their own voice. As addressed by authors Henry Giroux and Susan Giroux (2003), "[d]emocratic politics demands the full participation of an educated populace" (p. 28). It is important that educators make their students feel comfortable to express their ideas in the classroom as well as

outside of the classroom. When educators create a classroom environment that is one of respecting others' opinions, students who communicate their ideas and thoughts openly and freely can begin to engage in deeper discussions with their respective classmates. Critical thinking can then be facilitated by the educator, thus creating an opportunity for shared learning and a creation of innovative ideas. Educated citizens help to address issues of most importance that are in need of change. "Progressives like DuBois, Dewey, and Adams...believed that education for a democratic citizenry was an essential condition of equality and social justice and had to be provided through public and higher education" (Giroux & Giroux, 2007, p. 30). Higher education provides an opportunity for students to openly and freely express their ideas and exchange thoughts in an environment conducive to civil discussion where the importance of communication is addressed. In an alternative view, authors Giroux and Giroux (2007), point out that "educators seemed to have lost the language for linking schooling to democracy, convinced that education is now about job training and competitive market advantage" (p. 28). It is imperative for educators to challenge their students to openly debate and provide them with the communication skills necessary to resolve conflicts. Once students enter the workforce, they will be better communicators. By doing so, they become a valuable team member, thus becoming a positive force in society. Educators who challenge the ideas and thoughts of their students are creating an individual who can think critically and independently. Students need to understand the importance of communicating with various personality types. Knowing how to write clearly and effectively is essential for their ideas to be taken into consideration. Without these skills learned and practiced in higher education, a student will not be prepared for what will ultimately be faced in the workforce. A skilled citizen versus an unskilled citizen results in "a classical Marxian account in which low skilled workers" are reduced based on their lack of knowledge for

the job, thus creating an imbalance in productivity (Grusky & Ku, 2007, p. 24). Viewing this issue through the lens of a functionalist, creating a balance and equal approach by producing well-educated citizens can alleviate the problem of knowledge discrepancies that hinder work productivity. Students who complete their post-secondary degree can then obtain a career in an area in which they were trained. When critical thinking occurs, rationalization can begin.

Equity

While understanding the importance of social efficiency as it relates to higher education, it is also important to view another aspect of higher education as seen through social mobility. In Labaree's (1997) article, he defines social mobility as it relates to education as a "commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions...education is seen as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for the more desirable market roles" (p. 42). His definition speaks to the developing ideas and purpose of the goal an individual seeks out once completing their degree in higher education. Viewing the social issue of writing through the lens of social mobility, a student who has established well-developed writing and communication skills upon graduation, develops a sense of self-accomplishment and self-worth instilled within, which allows for self-gratitude for their achievements. Creating a balanced and equal approach to an issue as the functionalist theory suggests, while viewing the effective writing and communication skills learned and enhanced from a students' academic career, is essential for their well-being as well as their personal productivity in society.

Society needs to be able to express ideas openly and freely with a sense of purpose, while being in tune with their audience. It is important to understand the power of diversity and community as it shapes the productivity of society as a whole. Labaree (1997) does point out that

the “social mobility perspective often puts groups in conflict with each other” (p. 54). This point made about the social mobility view aligns with that of conflict theory. Group structures compete for social economic gain. This statement further explains that students from different class structures, such as the working class and upper middle class, want the best for their children in regards to “greater access to educational benefits” (Labaree, 1997, p. 54). It is also important that higher education be aware of social issues that students face upon entering a college or university setting for the first time. In the article, *A Social Epistemology of Educational Research*, author Thomas Popkewitz explains social mobility as it relates to an agency of change. “Social scientific knowledge inscribed an individual who was seen as possessing agency....It became possible to think about an actor (individuals or social groups) being mobilized and acting as a force in social change” (Popkewitz, 1999, p. 25). This progressive individual is able to make change within their own environment, which ultimately changes their surroundings in which they live. Thus, higher education serves as a tool to help individuals create this change.

The social issue of writing and communication is important for the success of an individual, it allows ideas to be well articulated so that opinions can be heard. When an individual feels confident in their own writing and communication skills, they are able to express themselves in a manner in which their opinions are heard. In a workplace environment, an individual who is able to express their ideas either in written or verbal form, communication occurs that results in change. Popkewitz (1999) underlines the notion that the “psychological sciences contributed to progress by developing a consciousness committed to hard work and democratic principles. The actor (parent, child, male/female, class) became an agent who could be identified...John Dewey, for example, inscribed political/moral assumptions of progress into personal development within a conception of ‘community’” (p. 19). An individual termed as an

agent of change, creates an understanding of how communities are developed. Each person is unique and it is in this uniqueness that independent voices are heard. There are many positives that diversity and community bring to a society. One needs to be able to articulate their thoughts in ways in which communication is understood. Both community and diversity help create a deeper understanding of various thoughts and views within a society. The article, *Does 2+2 Still Equal Four?*, explains that “learning takes place in communities of practice and is indexed by changes in participation within these communities. The primary means of implementing these principles is to convene practitioners...who are viewed as key actors in informal institutional networks” (Dowd et al., 2008, p. 12). Both educators and students need to become the agent for change. Without a society of deep thinkers, progress in the workforce and in people’s own personal lives would stagnate. A community of deep thinkers who can rationalize problems cannot be accomplished without writing and communication. It is important in society to have views that are strong and meaningful and those that speak to a variety of populations. Having these views help shape and define society as a people.

Writing and communication skills are pivotal in articulating one’s own place in society. In Popkewitz’s (1999) article, he explains that “enabled people think about how the world was built up according to their own methods and rationality” (p. 20). A functionalist view focuses on a balance of ideas expressed to help keep society on an equal setting. When individuals share their viewpoints on matters of societal issues, whether based on race, gender, equality, or access, they should be able to do so in a nonthreatening environment. In contrast, looking through the ideas of the conflict theory, one could argue that creating a balance in society based on individuals’ expressed ideas will be neither seen nor heard. Ideas of a differing mindset from another individual’s perspective would create conflict within a society that values power

structures and limits progressive ideas for change. Underlining the importance of writing and communication skills to articulate one's own place in society intertwines with the Popkewitz's (1999) idea that "[p]eople are expected to 'be seen' and 'see' themselves as individuals who could act in their world...the individual now [becomes] a citizen of a nation" (p. 18). Each individual must have a place in society where they can express thoughts and ideas freely. Society needs individuals who can express their thoughts and can listen to others. Clear communication which promotes a clear understanding of other people's ideas can create a better social atmosphere for productivity to occur. When one looks at society through multiple lenses to better understand an issue, they gain a deeper sense of how to resolve it while still being able to recognize the potential outcome that could change and alter society.

A society needs to be able to adapt to change and know how to listen and understand one another. A society that expresses ideas openly and freely with a sense of purpose, is more likely to be in tune with their audience. Audre Lorde (1983) gives special attention to the importance of one's own individuality and difference as it is viewed in society, expressing, "how to take our differences and make them strengths" (p. 27). In her article, Lorde addresses the feminist view of how society needs to be open to all ideas from different cultural backgrounds as well as other gender types. She expresses, "the absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political" (Lorde, 1983, p. 25). To understand the differences between individuals and class structures and what is valued and not valued according to standards for that class, one can develop a sense of understanding and appreciation for the differences that they bring to the conversation. This creates an understanding and an acceptance of diversity. For to dismiss ideas or thoughts of a specific class group is to dismiss an idea or thought that could be potentially profound. It is in a community of diverse people that is essential

for society to survive and prosper. Sharing ideas and talents help make our culture thrive. It is important to understand various class cultures and their differences and their strengths. By understanding one another and appreciating our differences, society can become whole.

Theoretical Scaffolding

In better understanding how theories can help scaffold the learning process of non-traditional students in higher education, one must consider pragmatism, cognitive theory, self-efficacy, and reader-response theory. These theories shape the overall development of how a student comprehends their own writing strategies and skills.

In the book *Pragmatism and Educational Research*, authors Gert J. J. Biesta and Nicholas C. Burbules (2003) give mention to summarizing John Dewey's theories:

One way to summarize Dewey's theory of action is to say that it amounts to a theory of experimental learning. Dewey characterized living organisms-including the human organism-as capable of establishing and maintaining a dynamic, coordinated transaction with its environment. Through this process the predispositions of the organism become more focused and specific, which is another way of saying that through the tentative, experimental way of establishing coordinated transaction the organism has learned....It is the learning in the sense of the acquisition of a complex set of predispositions to act....In this process the world becomes differentiated...infused with meaning.

In the figure shown, John Dewey's Pragmatism is the center of the idea behind the how education should be seen as the focal point. Surrounding the Pragmatists view is Cognitive Theory by Lev Vygotsky, Transactional Theory by Louise Rosenblatt, and Vincent Tinto's

Learning Communities. I feel that all of these theories are critical for helping to understand how to approach teaching and learning towards first generation non-traditional students.

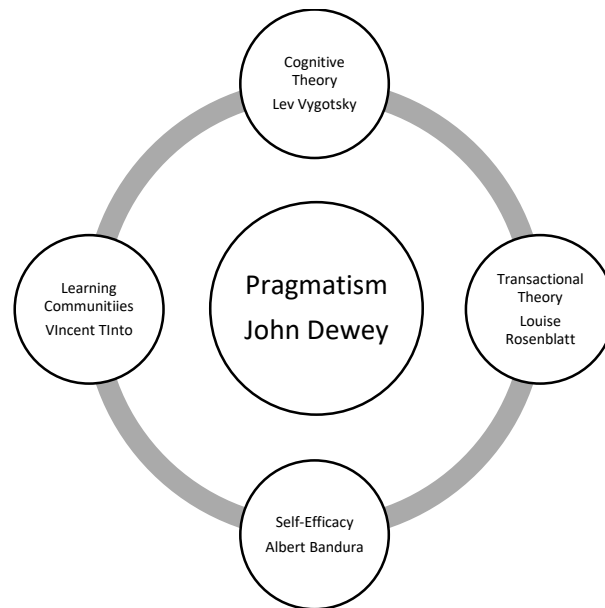


Figure 1

My philosophy of education is one that enhances students’ productivity and active learning skills. I want each student to feel confident and secure in their own writing ability. John Dewey (1902), one of the founders of Pragmatism, states, “...we must take our stand with the child and our departure from him. It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning” (as cited in Talebi, 2015, p. 5). This statement defines for me the whole concept of teaching for cognitive growth and development in each student.

During my own classroom instruction, I have found that it is most advantageous when I modify my teaching technique each semester to reach the various learning styles of my students. This practice has afforded me great opportunities. Using small discussion groups to paired activities that focus more on developing in-depth critical thinking skills has really helped

students to connect and understand the writing process. I also have students conduct peer reviews and score their own essays using rubrics which have made them more engaged with their own writing. In connection with the transactional theory, otherwise known as the reader-response theory, developed by Louise Rosenblatt, I have been able to facilitate a deeper learning within my classroom during instruction. “Rosenblatt’s view of meaning making is firmly grounded in pragmatic philosophy — particularly John Dewey’s radical empiricism — where the experiencing subject and experienced object constitute a primal, integral, relational unity” (Connell, 2008, p. 104). It is in this process that I am able to see the benefits of peer review and small group discussion on a common article that I have students discuss in class. “Readers make sense of texts by applying, reorganizing, revising, or extending both private and public elements selected from their personal linguistic-experiential reservoirs” (Connell, 2008, p. 103). These steps allow students to recognize the importance of understanding the concept of audience and purpose while paying attention to detail. By incorporating peer review within the class, along with detailed comments focusing more on content and critical thinking, has helped re-evaluate how students view their own writing. Seeing firsthand how my students respond to peer review has been positive in their revision process. In addition to practicing these skills, my written comments on each student’s essay for revision purposes has helped gain clear communication between reader and writer.

It is also important for me to enhance student learning through the actions of building strong relationships between the concepts of tutoring and mentoring, which has helped refocus the purpose of my own teaching. By providing my own educational philosophy to the writing consultants I hire, I am able to witness a positive learning outcome that is organic to the tutoring process. The text, *Perspectives on Learning*, explains, “The best way to learn a new idea,

according to Dewey, was by means of ‘normal communication with others’—the process of communication in which the learner was interacting with others in purposeful activities or investigations of common interest” (Phillips & Soltis, 2009, p. 56). Within a tutorial session, writing consultants have the students read their paper aloud giving the student an opportunity to hear their own words for clarity. “[E]ducational philosopher John Dewey...argued tirelessly for seeing the education of each individual in a social and communal context” (Lunsford & Ede, 2012, p. 152). During training sessions, I model good study habits and demonstrate the best tutoring strategies that will help improve students’ intellectual growth. This process then evokes a conversation that student and writing consultant have together about the purpose and audience of the paper and the goal it is trying to achieve.

Approaching teaching and tutorial sessions in a pragmatic way helps to interconnect the meaning and understanding of learning as it relates to writing. This learning approach is highlighted from the theorist, Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky is quoted in an article saying, “One of the most fundamental ideas in the area of the development of thinking and speech is that there can be no fixed formula that determines the relationship between thinking and speech and that is suitable for all stages of development and all forms of loss” (Gajdamaschko, 2006, p. 35-36). This statement speaks to the idea that all students learn at their own pace and engage in material taught to them in ways in which they can grasp the meaning that is most conducive to their own learning. Knowing this fact, I incorporate various teaching skills to address the kinesthetic learner, the auditory learner, and the visual learner.

Authors Biesta and Burbules (2003) explain Dewey’s theory of inquiry as “Inquiry does not solve problems by returning to a previous, stable situation, but by means of a transformation of the current situation into a new situation. There is, therefore, no absolute end to inquiry.” The

Outcome of the Process of Inquiry clearly shows that it is precisely because of this cooperation that inquiry has both an:

actual and a conceptual outcome. Although conceptual operations are as such not necessary to being about a unified situation-because this can also happen though trial and error-they are necessary if we want to learn something from solving writings Dewey referred to the conceptual outcome of inquiry as knowledge-and this may indeed be close to the way in which we are inclined to use that word in our day-to-day speech. (Biesta & Burbules, 2003)

The authors then go on to explain these dimensions (modes) as knowing, experience, practical, and ethical, aesthetic, and the religious mode. Biesta and Burbules (2003) state that “Dewey’s definition of experience allows him to restore reality to all dimensions or aspects to the way in which human beings are ‘in the world.’” After reading that paragraph, I thought about the writing process. Dewey is quoted saying, “The object of foresight of consequences is not to predict the future. It is to ascertain the meaning of present activities and to secure, so far as a possible, a present activity with a unified meaning” (as cited in Biesta & Burbules, 2003). This viewpoint caused me to think about how students revise their own writing and how they are able to instinctively use the modes of experience whether it is knowledge, practical or ethical. Students base this information on their own claims in relationship to the academic research they have gathered. They then review and revise their own writing and process this information to improve and clarify the meanings in which they want to convey to their reader. “The Deweyan approach implies that science produces possibilities that can be used by practitioners in their day-to-day actions-and more especially in their own inquiries, their own attempts to address the problems that confront them” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). I related this statement as my role as

writing center director. The research I have studied both on writing center theory and practice has definitely been beneficial to my directorship in helping me show student tutors how to assist other students who use our tutorial services with their writing needs. Some student writers struggle with an assignment and just need help understanding their own writing style. The research explains how to implement certain practices in helping students with various writing issues. Yet, there are students that use our writing center services that possess either physical disabilities or learning disabilities. It is in these tutorial sessions that I have had to use my “own inquiries” to help modify tutorial sessions. Dewey’s Process of Inquiry delves into the practice applications of being a researcher in the sense that one has to look at an issue, understand the issue and then explain how they would tackle this issue. Biesta and Burbules (2003) explain Indeterminate and Problematic situations and then lead into Dewey’s reasoning behind this as “[p]roblems are not simply ‘there’ but emerge as a result of the identification of an indeterminate situation as being problematic, as being in need of inquiry.” In researching my dissertation topic on non-traditional student writers who transfer from a community college to a university, it is interesting to notice a common thread from the evidence that other researchers are saying about this particular issue. The Process of Inquiry for me comes to fruition. Dewey’s existential operations and conceptual operations are both understood in regards to the research being completed. Looking at an issue in an existential way helps to see how it can be improved once action is taken. Conceptual operations as the authors have explained, does help my own understanding of the literature on my research topic as one in which I can “reflect” upon and “think” about ways in which I can understand this issue of the writing skills of my students. As a writing center director and a teacher of writing, I am consistently reevaluating my teaching approach towards my student tutors and my students. Various learning styles are necessary to

help each student understand that there are many ways to solve a problem or to write out a response. In the readings, I found an interesting quote cited from Dewey when he suggests, “the qualities that custom prescribes as properly belonging to objects of their virtue of their being factors in a social life,” further underline that meaning and purpose are essential when engaging learning qualities of students in a classroom setting (Biesta & Burbles, 2003). The more a professor knows about their students experiences and learning styles, they will be better equipped to assist them in the classroom with their assignments.

Next Steps

In this qualitative study, I have addressed a purposefully selected sample of eight. These University of Mississippi DeSoto regional campus students compromised of male and female individuals with various majors who are first generation non-traditional students at a southern state university regional campus. Within this qualitative study approach, I will be asking questions to these students that will address how they perceive their own writing abilities upon entering into The University of Mississippi DeSoto regional campus. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the perception of academic writing for first generation non-traditional students at a The University of Mississippi DeSoto regional campus. When constructing academic writing, it is important to know that

[t]he development of research writing is seen as a complex sociocultural practice situated within specific academic research contexts involving particular discipline languages, text types, patterns and languages, governed by cultural codes and conventions about what constitutes effective texts and appropriate use of language within them. (Bastalich et al., 2014, p. 375)

Understanding the techniques that encompass academic writing, students are able to compose well developed essays that focus on research within their discourse of study. The research questions are focused on academic writing.

1. What writing concerns are expressed by non-traditional first generation students entering the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site?
2. Upon entering the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site, do non-traditional first generation students feel as though they are prepared for academic writing?
3. What can non-traditional first generation students at the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site do to help strengthen their writing skills while taking academic courses?

To help achieve answers to these guiding research questions, the following interview questions will be asked to the student participants to help generate an understanding of their perceptions of academic writing.

The interview questions for this qualitative research study will include:

1. How have your past experiences with writing prepared you for writing at the university?
2. How do you feel about the level of writing required in your discipline?
3. What is the amount of writing required in your major?
4. How do you currently feel about the quality and level of your own writing?
5. How prepared do you feel for the level of writing required at the university?
6. How much do you value your writing ability?
7. Can you give me an example of where you have best demonstrated your writing skills?
8. What on-site campus resources are you aware of that could help improve your writing skills?

If so, what were your experiences using these resources?

MANUSCRIPT TWO

Introduction to the Problem of Practice

The University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site faculty have expressed to students the importance of clear communication through writing and the importance of argument and critical analysis skills as it relates to essay writing. Students attending classes on this off-campus instructional site have expressed a genuine concern for their own writing ability. It is evident that students who are transitioning from basic writing classes to more advanced writing classes are lacking the necessary skills of contextual knowledge such as critical thinking, paragraph development, sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, and use of transitional phrases. Students who do not possess the necessary writing skills to construct their message in written form clearly to their audience are most likely to exhibit low-confidence levels in their writing ability and their overall academic performance.

Even though the lack of adequate writing skills required for academic level courses affects some students, it is those students who identify as non-traditional first generation that have expressed their concerns more vocally. There are a wide range of writing concerns that plague these non-traditional first generation students. One issue that disrupts academic writing skills for non-traditional first generation students is the time spent away from academic learning. These students who are currently enrolled in the university may have been so far removed from how to write an academic essay, that creating an introductory paragraph with a well thought out thesis statement becomes a struggle that is difficult to overcome. Other issues are visible in their writing that range from developing clear body paragraphs with topic sentences to supporting

evidence to back up their commentary. These are seen as elements that need better structuring. “Research on college writing reveals the habits, skills, and actions associated with the writing process, such as planning, considering audience and context, researching, drafting, and revising, are key aspects of successful writing in college classrooms” (Pacello, 2019, p. 187). By increasing writing proficiency, educators and administrators can work together to eliminate this issue especially among non-traditional first generation students.

Additionally, the writing load required at the university level is more intense for the majors offered on the regional campus as opposed to a community college. Each major requires essays that encourage research. These essays are then longer and require students to express more of their critical thinking skills. Writing becomes a way for students to communicate their thoughts and ideas critically on the issue to demonstrate to the professor that they have retained the knowledge learned from the class. If writing skills have not been retained or learned during their arrival at the university, this becomes a major concern for students which then affects their academic performance. “Writing is seen as a problem in need of fixing...the problem is identified as underprepared educational back-grounds...or the non-traditional nature of many students” (Badenhorst, Mooney, Rosales, Dyer, & Ru, 2015, p.1). Professors who seek to find ways to enhance students’ writing capabilities can help these students overcome their fears of writing. Understanding the perceptions of non-traditional first generation students in regards to their own writing ability, educators and administrators can be consciously aware of how essential writing skills are for students to achieve ultimate success within their academic courses and their future careers. The practitioner wanted to gain a deeper knowledge of what main issues contribute to their lack of writing skills and how they perceive their own writing as they enter into the university setting.

Another issue that is a universal concern is formatting. The majority of majors that students take on this regional campus are Criminal Justice, Social Work, Education, Accountancy, and General Studies. All of these majors have research writing assignments that require the American Psychological Association (APA) formatting or other formatting styles for research documentation. Students claim that they have not been taught other forms of formatting other than the Modern Language Association (MLA). Professors cannot assume that these transfer students know how to format essays when they enter into the university. The notion of formatting and documentation becomes a new process. Even though these students may have learned these skills in their past composition classes, these skills may be completely forgotten and need to be refreshed.

Summary of Problem of Practice and Dissertation in Practice

The nature of this problem of practice emerged from the observations of the practitioner. Witnessing the frustrations from non-traditional first generation students who attend this regional campus have at times expressed that the writing required from the university is more intense than the writing that they were accustomed to from their previous institution. Understanding the demographics of students attending this regional campus, professors need to have the patience as well as instructional materials to scaffold writing concepts that need developing. This approach will ensure students' learning productivity. Consistently, post-secondary education professors are plagued by students' lack of academic writing skills. This lack of academic writing skill set is also prevalent in first generation non-traditional students. Students who are consciously aware of their inadequate writing skill set tend to feel less confident and less assured of their capabilities.

Students of all demographics have learned at a young age the fundamental skills of writing. If these fundamental writing skills were not retained at an early age, students then face a

huge learning gap when they enter into college. “Researchers have found that very often college students do not approach writing systematically and instead rely on methods of writing that they have used in the past, neglecting to take ownership over their own learning” (Pacello, 2019, p. 187). Relying on writing skills that are not well developed leads to the students trying to catch up with their college peers. This issue becomes challenging for the students as well as professors. Professors see firsthand the writing struggles and lack of writing skills from some of their students. Unclear and unfocused writing becomes difficult for the professor to decipher. Students’ inability to express themselves in written form has become a major concern. Professors are trying to find ways to improve class instruction and help students achieve the success they need to graduate from college. It is then with the help of student services, such as the Writing Center, which helps to assist the student’s writing. This service proves to be beneficial to students who utilize it.

Educators and administrators are witnessing the writing concerns expressed by students in regards to their writing ability and writing level that is required from the university. It is this issue that has generated more involvement in trying to understand this lack of confidence and lack of writing ability among students, specifically non-traditional first generation students. The main focus of this dissertation is to better understand the concerns and challenges of academic writing faced by non-traditional first generation students.

Research Questions

1. What writing concerns are expressed by non-traditional first generation students entering the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site?
2. Upon entering the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site, do non-traditional first generation students feel as though they are prepared for academic writing?

3. What can non-traditional first generation students at the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site do to help strengthen their writing skills while taking academic courses?

Definition of Terms

Non-traditional: Non-traditional is a term that categorizes students who are aged 25 years or older entering into college. According to The National Center for Education Statistics, the term non-traditional student can possess the following qualities: “delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma...[and] defined as those 25 or older” (Pelletier, 2010, p. 2).

First generation: a student whose parents did not graduate from college. “The term ‘first-generation’ implies the possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their parents did not attend college” (“The Center,” 2017).

Transfer student: a student who attends college for a time and then leaves and then returns back to college. It could also refer to a student who has attended another institution and then leaves and attends a different institution. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) (2016) there are three types of transfer students:

Vertical Transfer (also referred to as traditional, forward, upward, 2/4): Transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution.

Lateral Transfer: Transfer from a four-year institution to another four-year institution OR from a two-year institution to another two-year institution.

Reverse transfer can be used to refer to the process whereby academic credits for applicable coursework at a college or university are transferred back to the community college for purposes of awarding an associate’s degree (also referred to as reverse

transfer of credits, reverse credit transfer, reverse articulation agreement). Reverse transfer can also be used to refer to transfer from a four-year institution to a two-year institution (para. 3).

Community college: a two year institution where a student can obtain an associate's degree or enroll at a university to complete their course work and obtain a bachelor's degree. "Community colleges, sometimes called junior colleges, are two-year schools that provide affordable postsecondary education as a pathway to a four-year degree" (Homeland Security, 2012).

University: an institution where a student can obtain a bachelor's degree or continue on to complete a master's degree in their specific field of study.

Off-campus instructional site / Regional campus: an institution that offers courses to students just like the main campus institution, but a regional campus is located in another city away from the main campus institution. "A satellite campus or branch campus or regional campus is a campus of a university or college that is physically at a distance from the original university or college area" ("Satellite Campus," n.d. para. 1).

WRIT 250: Advanced Composition: A course, offered at The University of Mississippi, extending the skills of academic writing and research established in first-year writing. Students analyze readings of increasing complexity, write in a variety of genres, construct ePortfolios, compose presentations with electronic tools, and choose their fields of emphases for research projects (Writing & Rhetoric, 2017, para. 1).

American Psychological Association (APA Style): Formatting style used for those writing in the fields of social sciences. "APA Style is a writing style and format for academic documents such as scholarly journal articles and books. It is commonly used for citing sources within the field of behavioral and social sciences" ("APA Style," n.d. para. 1).

Modern Language Association (MLA): Formatting style used for those writing in the fields of Liberal Arts. “MLA style is a system for documenting sources in scholarly writing” (“MLA Style,” n.d.).

Writing Center: A designated place on a college or university campus where student tutors assist other students with their writing assignments or other forms of writing. “Writing centers also reinforce the generally accepted emphasis on writing as a process, for in the center writers actually engage in writing processes with tutors as they learn by doing how to plan, to brainstorm, to ask questions for revision, to rework written text, to add variety to sentence structure, to organize large amounts of material into a research paper, to proofread, and so on” (Harris, 1998).

Writing tutor: A student enrolled at a university that has been trained to help assist students at that university with their writing assignments or writing issues. A writing tutor gives more feedback to the writing instead of solely editing the writing of the student. “Tutors, who may be peers, professionals, graduate students, part-time instructors, or full-time teachers, meet individually with writers in the writing center either briefly (e.g., fifteen to twenty minutes) or for more extended periods of time (typically an hour) to attend to that particular writer’s concerns” (Harris, 1998).

Data Overview

The overarching issue is that students who are transferring from other institutions and are taking their junior and senior level undergraduate courses at the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site are not writing at the collegiate level that faculty require of them. This issue has also affected faculty as well. Faculty who teach on the off-campus instructional site have witnessed this lack of writing skill set that is essential for college level courses. This

qualitative study gathered eight non-traditional first generation students who attend the off-campus instructional site with various majors. They were individually asked to give their feedback on the issues of writing skills required at the university level and how they perceive their own writing ability.

Listening to the concerns from non-traditional first generation students about their writing skills and the writing required at the university level, the researcher obtained a sample specific to this university off-campus instructional site. This sample consisted of eight non-traditional first generation students, two were male and six were female. Their majors were General Studies, Education, Accountancy, Criminal Justice and Social Work. During this qualitative study, one-on-one interviews were conducted to best determine the views of how students felt about academic writing upon their transfer from another institution. The structured interview questions were given to the participants during the fall of 2018 to the fall of 2019. Once the research study and interview questions were submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board, the research project was approved. The study was then conducted. All of these participants were enrolled at the university and had expressed that they were interested in participating in this study. All of the participants' conversations were recorded and notes were taken.

Each non-traditional first generation student who agreed to participate in this qualitative study was assigned a pseudonym. This pseudonym is used to protect each student's true identity. In Table 1, the student's pseudonym, major, age, and the date of the interview are listed.

Table 1:

| Pseudonym | Major | Age | Date of Interview |
|------------------|---|--------------|--------------------------|
| Christian | General Studies (History, Biology, and Religion) | 26 years old | December 13, 2018 |
| Cara | Elementary Education | 28 years old | April 1, 2019 |
| Terry | General Studies | 38 years old | March 18, 2019 |
| Susan | Social Work | 42 years old | March 25, 2019 |
| Felicia | Accounting | 42 years old | July 30, 2019 |
| Annabel | Accounting | 34 years old | July 30, 2019 |
| Grace | Criminal Justice | 25 years old | September 30, 2019 |
| Stephen | General Studies | 36 years old | September 30, 2019 |

Limitations

Throughout this qualitative study, there were definitely some limitations present. The sample size collected was only gathered from one off-campus instructional site. Spanning the study to all other university off-campus instructional sites could have provided a variety of responses that pertained to academic perceptions of writing skills as seen by non-traditional first generation students. Only a sample of eight students was used to gather data which could have been expanded. Students who enroll at the university off-campus instructional site are classified as juniors and seniors, yet only senior non-traditional first generation students participated. It would have been interesting to compare the responses from students who were in their junior year as well. Of the eight students interviewed, three were General Studies majors, two were

Accountancy majors, one was an Elementary Education major, another was a Criminal Justice major, and one Social Work major. Also, this study, which was conducted over a course of one year, could have been extended to three to five years to get a variety of responses.

Another concern was that the interviewer was well known to each student participant. This could be seen as an ethical or conflict of interest issue. The interviewer's role at the university off-campus instructional site serves as both a research writing professor for WRIT 250 Advanced Composition and the off-campus instructional site Writing Center Director. Most of these students knew the interviewer as their former or current professor or knew of the interviewer as the writing center director. Students' responses may have been influenced in this capacity to appease the nature of the study and may have avoided a true response to the questions asked as it related to their personal writing skill issues.

During the actual interview questioning, the interviewer could have been more conversational with the participants to allow for more natural conversation to emerge which would have helped gain a deeper understanding of the nature that surrounded the issues of writing skills throughout the university courses. The first question asked could have included information that would help guide the participant in responding more specifically to the years removed from the university setting prior to their return.

Some of the questions asked during the interview had to be repeated for further clarification. In hindsight, the phrasing of these two questions could have been clearer, since the answers collected were similar to each other. Additionally, a question could have been asked to determine whether or not the student participants had ever utilized their professor's office hours for additional help on a writing assignment.

Presentation of Findings

The students that participated in this qualitative case study were able to give a true account of how they personally felt about the quality and level of writing that is required at the university. Most students felt as though they were prepared for the level of work that was expected while in college but expressed feelings of apprehensiveness when they commented on their own writing ability. After the interview, the responses to the questions were evaluated and a common theme was determined to represent the overall views of the participants. During this interview, eight questions were asked of each participant. These questions focused on the basis of whether or not the student felt prepared for university level writing. The theme for this topic was Preparedness for Academic Writing. The responses were then collected and coded. See Table 3.

The next theme was categorized as Perception of Writing. The results from these questions were also coded. See Table 4.

The last theme from the results of the participants' responses was On-site Campus Resources Utilized. The only code used was Writing Center, which resulted from whether the participants were aware of an on-site campus resource and utilized the Writing Center services. See table 5.

The tables below show the results by number of participants that responded accordingly.

Table 2:

| <u>Preparedness for Academic Writing</u> | <u>Responses</u> |
|---|-------------------------|
| Prior to entering into a 4 year university | 2 |
| During the university | 6 |
| <u>Perception of Academic Writing</u> | <u>Responses</u> |
| Comfortable with writing in the discipline | 3 |
| Confident in writing ability | 6 |
| Value writing ability | 8 |
| High Amount of Writing in Major | 6 |
| <u>On-site Campus Resources Utilized</u> | <u>Responses</u> |
| Writing Center | 8 |

The results from Preparedness for Academic Writing identifies how non-traditional first generation students felt about academic writing prior to their entrance into the university as well as during their college experience.

Table 3:

| <u>Preparedness for Academic Writing</u> | <u>Number of Responses</u> |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Prior to entering into a 4 year university | 2 |
| During the university | 6 |

Preparedness for Academic Writing

The participants in this interview process were honest about their personal views of their own writing ability. The majority of non-traditional first generation students felt unprepared for academic writing prior to entering into a four year university. Only two students stated that they felt prepared when first attending the university. Overall, students did feel prepared during their college experience. This view indicates that students felt assured about the writing assignments required in their respective majors.

Prior to entering into a four year university

The majority of these student participants expressed that they were definitely not prepared for the level of academic writing that was required upon entering into the university. Terry, Susan, and Christian claimed that overall writing was challenging for them. Terry commented by saying, “It was not the best. I feared writing.” Susan admitted, “I was not prepared for the length of the essays that were assigned.” Stephen stated, “Well, honestly, I can say I am one of those people who struggles at writing...I never developed...those skills to help me write better.”

From the eight students interviewed, the two students that expressed a solid foundation for writing during their high school years were Cara and Annabel. Cara stated that she felt well prepared based on her high school and college classes before she began her education major. Annabel expressed that “in high school, having a good English teacher...really helped prepare me.”

It was also clear that the change from MLA format to APA or other formatting styles were foreign to non-traditional first generation students which hindered their writing ability resulting in confidence issues. Both Susan and Christian expressed their views on formatting

styles. Susan mentioned that “You were not taught how to format and expand on the length of the paper.” When interviewing Christian, he made clear comments on how his previous experiences shaped his writing, yet he was lacking skills needed for formatting. “My past experiences did prepare me...however, it did not prepare me for the different formats...APA and MLA and all the different citations.”

Stephen and Terry admitted that they use informal or conversational language when writing academic papers. Knowing that a more formal writing approach is required in academic writing both Terry and Stephen realized that they needed to improve on these skills for themselves. Terry admitted that “I write like I talk...I have a lot of grammatical errors.” Stephen gave an honest comment as well. “I had to understand that I write the way I speak, so I had to be really cognizant of some of the stuff I say when I’m writing, because I find myself writing the way I speak.”

When interviewing these non-traditional first generation students, Felicia indicated that being far removed from the writing process affected her writing. “I graduated high school in 1994, so I haven’t had to write a paper since high school.” Another student gave an interesting metaphor for the feelings of her own writing. Grace stated, “When I came to the community college, my writing was like in a closed space.” She expressed that even though she felt isolated in her own writing, her community college professor provided helpful tips to broaden her vocabulary and also gave clear instruction for how to revise and restructure her sentences.

During the university

When students become acclimated to the routine of college life, they become more in tune to their responsibilities as an academic student; therefore, subsiding their level of stress. The majority of responses reflected assuredness in writing while attending the university.

When interviewing Stephen, he gave his feedback about the university as a whole. “I think The University of Mississippi’s...expectations are on par compared to other universities....Attending here, I definitely think it will prepare me moving forward.” Christian explained that after high school, he spent five years away from an academic setting. He then enrolled at a community college and then continued on to obtain a full four year degree at this university off-campus instructional site. Gaining writing skills from the community college became an essential skill necessary for academic writing at the university.

Comments from Cara, Terry, and Susan all felt prepared to tackle the level of writing at the university, but each expressed different struggles that seemed to affect their writing overall. Cara stated, “The hardest part was formatting.” Even though Terry felt prepared for academic writing during college, she seemed to possess apprehensive feelings when beginning her writing assignments. “I had writer’s block....I have more problems with the idea of what to write about and then I get stuck...where it blocks me from being able to focus.” Susan opened up about having anxiety about writing, but realized that she needed to “buckle down and do it.” Susan seemed to be fully aware of her writing abilities, but recognized that she needed to motivate herself to complete her tasks.

Felicia and Grace both expressed that they were prepared for writing upon entering the university but were not initially prepared to take WRIT 250 Advanced Composition. Even though this course was challenging, Felicia stated that it prepared her if she ever decided to further her academic career and obtain a master’s degree. Grace, on the other hand, commented on the reason why she enrolled in the WRIT 250 course. She mentioned this course would help her “have more confidence and to be able to research.” Even though both students were ill

prepared in taking this course they felt that it would enhance their writing and research skills needed for other courses in their majors.

Table 4:

| <u>Perception of Academic Writing</u> | <u>Number of Responses</u> |
|--|----------------------------|
| Comfortable with writing in the discipline | 3 |
| Confident in writing ability | 6 |
| Value writing ability | 8 |
| High Amount of Writing in Major | 6 |

Perception of Academic Writing

Perception of Writing focuses on how non-traditional first generation students perceive their comfort level when writing in their discipline and how confident they are in their own writing ability. Students also explain how they value writing and give their perceptions of the amount of writing within their major.

Comfortable with writing in the discipline

Students expressed their true concerns about the nature of how they felt when writing in their own discipline. It seemed that their responses focused more on the struggles than necessarily being comfortable. From the eight participants, only three stated that they felt comfortable with the writing required in their discipline. The others were open about their writing difficulties. Susan claimed that “There was more writing in my major than I expected. I always fight my way through writing.” Describing her writing process in such a way underscores the true concerns and pressures that non-traditional first generation students experience. Just like

Susan, Terry also expressed having fear but she overcame that fear. She stated that “At first, I was fearful and now I am comfortable.” This statement shows that when students work hard to overcome their fears and struggles, they can achieve their own academic success. Grace truly gave an honest response with the way she felt about writing and her own writing process. She stated, “It’s okay, but I get confused often about what the teacher or the professor wants me to do....It is kind of easy for another person, but I think about it too hard.” Stephen’s response focused on the university’s expectations of writing, stating that, “writing has to be at the highest level.”

Cara, an Education major, is a confident well-educated student who is comfortable with her own writing ability. After attending school at a community college, she took a five year break before entering into the university. While taking Education courses at the university, she thought there would be many papers to write but realized that the writing required in her major was not necessarily all research or essay based. Christian, a General Studies major who was pursuing a career in Education, gave a different response. He remarked that the writing level required in his discipline was “very high, because as a teacher you're expected to know how to spell every word in the English language.”

Overall, most non-traditional first generation students recognized that the amount of writing required in their discipline was adequate.

Confident with writing ability

The majority of these student participants expressed that they had difficulty with writing initially, but after they were accustomed to the rhythm of college and the assignments required of them, they expressed that they had confidence with their own writing ability. Students that expressed low-confidence levels in their writing, gave honest responses to this issue. Susan and

Terry both felt comfortable with their writing and recognized that it could be better. Susan explained, “I feel great about my writing after I’m finished...but during the process of my writing, I questioned myself.” She further explains by stating, “I’m not an exceptional writer...I do feel like the more essays you write the better prepared you are for the next one.” Claiming that each paper written helps to write the next paper is important to confirm that students have the understanding that the more you write the better one can improve. She then made an interesting statement for what she learned from her writing ability throughout attending the university. “I think my writing skills are better after being in the university. Once I got prepared for APA, I feel a bit more prepared.”

Terry opened up to say the, “quality of my own writing is mediocre. I’m not confident enough to write without having someone else proofread it for me.” Stephen gave a more in-depth response. “Honestly, I know my writing needs a lot of work. If I were to give a rating of my writing on a scale from 1-10, I would give it a 4. I want to work on it. One of the things that I am working on to improve my writing is to increase my reading. I hear the more you read the better you can write.”

Both Christian and Cara felt confident in their writing ability and admitted that they have come a long way. Cara stated, “I have really seen a lot of growth in myself as a writer.” Grace, Felicia, and Annabel all agreed that they felt very comfortable with their writing especially the writing required in their major. Annabel gave further explanation. “I’d like to believe it is pretty good. I’m comfortable with it. I feel that I am able to communicate clearly through my writings.” An additional question was asked to help clarify, which was, “Do you feel that your high school writing experience has helped you with your writing?” Annabel stated that the writing skills learned in high school helped her. She specifically mentioned how they helped her in the WRIT

250 class. She then expressed the value of writing needed in her current employment. She remarked on the amount of emails she writes to different employees. Here, Annabel makes the connection from writing in the academic setting to the importance of writing on the job.

Value writing ability

Responses on Value writing ability showed how students felt about the importance of their writing ability and its impact on how they communicate their thoughts and ideas in school as well as their workplace. These non-traditional first generation students remarked on the importance of writing.

Positive statements were made by both Cara and Christian on how they felt about their own writing abilities. Education major Cara states, “My writing ability is very valuable to me because I...have to be an excellent communicator.” Christian also claimed that, “I have a natural ability, I suppose, to writing and speaking. I feel like the better you speak the better you write. I like to throw in big words to make myself seem smart.”

Terry strongly stated that she values her own writing ability, but admitted, “I know that I can do better. I know it’s a process. I am definitely interested in enhancing my quality of writing compared to in the past. I am not fearful.” This comment serves as a self-reflective point made. It is human nature to have the desire to improve. Annabel gave a true to life response as writing is definitely valuable to her especially at her workplace where she is a manager. “I have to use it so much at work...it’s important to me that I communicate with office staff and other managers and upper management.” Stephen expressed a more pinpointed response to the value of writing as it effects furthering his educational career in Higher Education. He stated, “I value it a lot! That is why I want to get better at it. I understand as I move forward in my career to be an effective communicator as well as an effective writer are absolutely essential because I want to have a

career in Higher Ed.” Stephen understands the importance of writing and how valuable it can be as it can afford you opportunities that may not have been available to you if your writing skills were not at an acceptable coherent level.

High amount of writing in major

The two Social Work majors Terry and Susan both expressed that there was a large amount of writing in their major. Education and General Studies majors, Cara and Christian expressed that even though their majors did not require a lot of essays in the field of study, they indicated that there was a “decent amount of writing” such as lesson plans and instructional notes. Terry made a statement that confirmed that there is a lot of writing required in her major classes. Yet, Felicia and Annabel, both Accountancy majors, stated that the writing required in their major is minimal. Criminal Justice major Grace, explained that she does have writing assignments and explained the importance of writing within her field. She gave the example of a probation officer stating, “You have to be proficient with the writing. You have to explain in detail.”

Table 5:

| <u>Use of On-site Campus Resources Utilized</u> | <u>Number of Responses</u> |
|---|----------------------------|
| Writing Center | 8 |

Use of On-site Campus Resources Utilized

The responses from the non-traditional first generation students were overwhelmingly positive about being aware of an on-site student service that specifically focused on writing. All student participants named the writing center as being that service.

Writing Center

Cara explained that she was fully aware of the writing center and the services that it provided for students. She did state that she had a professor that required students to make appointments with the writing center. Although she was skeptical of using this service at first, she did state, “I do feel like it helped me a lot, because I’m not one of those people that... would ask for help.” She also commented on how the writing center tutors helped her “create an outline that was really helpful” when she was writing her paper.

Terry used the writing center as a support for her own writing. Having a tutor present and readily available helped. “Knowing that she was there just in case I needed her help, made me feel confident for the support that she could give me.”

Christian understood the positives when utilizing the writing center. He also realized that each had “different strengths and different weaknesses.” He was aware of what ideas to take and not to take. Overall, his experiences with the writing center were “wonderful.”

Grace commented about the helpfulness by receiving another person’s perspective on her writing. “I always go when I have a big paper or something, but the writing center helps because you get to see someone’s perspective on your paper instead of just your own perspective....I always ask what I need to improve on.” Susan explained the value of being able to talk to a tutor about her writing was most beneficial. “Having somebody to bounce the ideas off of was extremely helpful.”

Although Annabel was aware of the writing center service, she admitted that she had never made a face-to-face or online appointment because of her work and class schedule. She did

however make a comment about how useful it would be for those students just entering into college.

Stephen recounted one of his tutorial experiences with a tutor. “I noticed that I was a lot older than the writing center consultant...so I was hoping that she would be totally honest with me. I was so thankful that she was...she was brutally honest about how to make my paper a lot better. I really really enjoyed that feedback. So the Writing Center...is a vital resource....”

Discussions and Implications

During the non-traditional first generation students’ initial enrollment at the university, they admitted that they were not quite prepared for the level of writing. After reviewing the data from the student participants, it is evident that writing skills play an important foundational role throughout university courses. Students who lack the necessary writing skills are more inclined to suffer academically. Feelings of doubt, fear, anxiety, and uneasiness were all words used to express academic writing by these participants. The overall concern was that they felt unprepared for the writing required at the university level. Some students expressed that their limited writing background did not help them when entering into college; therefore, causing them to feel anxious which led to having feelings of low self-confidence when writing at a higher level.

Overwhelmingly, each student realized their writing needed to be improved. A few students expressed formatting as an issue of concern, but overall the majority of students claimed that the length of their paper and structure of their essay assignments were challenging.

It is evident that non-traditional first generation students are fully aware of the writing that is required of them within their academic courses. Writing essays, research papers, lesson plans, or reports, emphasize the fact that clear and well-developed writing is needed for communication.

The amount of writing required at the university was seen as extensive.

Knowing that these non-traditional first generation students were all seniors, their comments resulted in responses that stated they had confidence in their current writing ability but indicated that it was not always like that in the beginning. Students reflected on writing as an important skill not only in the university setting but also for their careers.

The students' quality of their own writing revealed that they all have improved over the semesters. Since these student participants were all seniors, they felt that their writing at this stage was adequate and definitely better than when they first started college. Some students did admit that during the writing process they felt a little unsure but once it was all completed they felt great about their writing.

All students stated how much they valued their own writing. Seeing the connections that students made with their writing as it relates to their coursework and their future careers, demonstrated how they improved in their writing after being in the university. They also saw how communication plays an important role with writing as well.

When professors witness informal or conversational writing, there is an indication that more explanation is needed on how to write in a more formal tone for academic essays. Skills need to be taught to ensure that students will be able to identify that their writing needs to be reworded for a more appropriate audience. Writing skills and techniques are needed to help them achieve this revision for formal writing. Although, this modification can become difficult when the students cannot make the distinction between what good writing looks like as opposed to bad writing.

Motivation was also a factor that interfered when students began their writing assignments. It is important that students put their fears and apprehensive feelings aside so that it does not plague their writing. Educators need to be aware of the various ways the writing process

can be taught. Foundational writing skills as well as critical thinking skills are needed so that non-traditional first generation students can overcome issues like writer's block which naturally interfere with the writing process. As Peter Elbow (1973) states, “most writing is founded on double binds: ‘you can’t find the right words till you know exactly what you are saying till you find just the right words. The consequence is that you must start by writing the wrong meanings in the wrong words, but keep writing till you get the right meaning in the right words. Only at the end will you know what you are saying” (as cited in Fulwiler, 1987, p. 59). Every writer suffers through writer’s block every now and then, yet stated from a non-traditional first generation student, the meaning is reflected more about their performance level.

The quality of writing from these students was expressed in a way in which they were struggling with the process of writing early on, but afterwards at the end of their coursework they stated a feeling of accomplishment. When addressing one’s own thoughts and actions based on issues that surround the writing process, critical thinking skills are then needed to be further developed for clearer writing to occur. Pragmatic theorist, John Dewey (1910), states that critical thinking is an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the furthest conclusions to which it ends” (p. 6). Educators who are aware of their students’ true feelings about their writing will be better equipped to assist them throughout the process of writing. It is crucial to truly listen and understand these comments from students as being a cry for help and understand their need for writing instruction.

Because of its complexity, communicating through written discourse requires a high level of abstract thinking in the art of the writer. The act of creating a piece of writing also demands the synthesis and simultaneous application of a large number of discrete

organizational skills. A writer must have something to write about, so content knowledge is imperative. (Houston, 2004, p. 7)

It was also evident that years spent away from writing or the writing process was definitely a factor infringing upon their ability. Their statements about being away from the academic setting for years has really impacted their confidence level and posed limitations that resulted in feelings of apprehension and separation from their peers. A student who knows that their writing skill ability is weak affects the way in which they tackle an assignment. Students can become withdrawn from the writing process and feel helpless. As Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy theory suggests:

self-efficacy represents one's belief in his or her ability to manage and successfully accomplish the actions requisite to effectively realize one's goals. As such, self-efficacy beliefs are not related to the skills an individual possesses. Rather, self-efficacy beliefs are related to the confidence an individual has in his or her skills. (as cited in "The Increased Importance," 2014, p. 65)

Understanding the audience and the purpose of an essay assignment is also imperative for essay development. Pressures that professors make on writing or the writing assignments affect this level of confidence in students as well. Students trying to achieve their best when their writing skills are lacking or are not as developed as their peers also cause fear and doubt. Carl Nagin (2006) states, "Because writing often involves complex thinking and problem solving, teachers need more than a set of fixed textbook procedures to teach it well and address the diverse needs of student writers" (p. 15). Being assured of one's own ability for writing is a needed core concept to assure a student's academic success. Having a good understanding of the writing

process and the importance of writing structure prior to entering into a college or university does help strengthen the academic performance of a student.

The writing center proved to be a beneficial and useful resource to non-traditional students in helping them improve upon their writing skills. All acknowledge it as an on-site campus resource as a place in which students can go to receive help on their writing assignments. Identifying that tutors from the writing center helped with prewriting skills such as creating an outline, demonstrates that these fundamental skills help to organize the structure of thought from the student writer. Tutors were also mentioned as being support systems to help with confidence issues. The writing center offers a calming and relaxing atmosphere where students come in on a regular basis just to get their thoughts and ideas together which truly proves to be an ideal situation for those students who are suffering from the pressures of academic life. All students regarded the writing center as being useful and supportive. Helpful, beneficial, and wonderful were just some of the words used to describe the writing center.

Future research should be done to help better understand the writing issues and concerns that prohibit clear writing productivity from non-traditional first generation students.

Summary of Findings

The findings throughout this study did expose the true perceptions of non-traditional first generation students on their views of academic writing. It concluded that there were specific areas that were focused around common threads of writing abilities and the feelings that were associated with these abilities. All of these results supported the Problem of Practice as an issue of concern for educators and administrators in higher education. To best ascertain these results, this qualitative research focused on the following guiding research questions:

1. What writing concerns are expressed by non-traditional first generation students entering the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site?
2. Upon entering the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site, do non-traditional first generation students feel as though they are prepared for academic writing?
3. What can non-traditional first generation students at the University of Mississippi off-campus instructional site do to help strengthen their writing skills while taking academic courses?

The overall responses from these questions resulted in three major themes. The first category being Preparedness for Academic Writing, the next was Perception of Writing, and the last being On-site Campus Resources Utilized. Within each theme, codes were developed to help categorize these students' responses.

Responses pertaining to the first code, Comfortable with writing in the discipline, the student participants expressed that they were lacking writing skills which impacted their ability to achieve fully in their academic setting. Students expressed words and phrases such as: fear, not prepared, struggle, and fighting through writing. Such words bring awareness to this issue of academic writing and the skills needed for students to succeed at this level.

The second code, Confident in writing ability, showcased the overall feelings students had while attending the university. Even though they expressed their comfort level of writing, they verbalized their lack of confidence in their writing. Most student participants expressed that they could further develop their writing skills.

The third code, Value writing ability, resulted in an overwhelming response from all student participants. Each student gave an example of how they valued their writing and why it is crucial for their future careers. Explanations of the importance of writing needed in their current jobs as well as the importance of writing within their majors, were all expressed. This validation

proves that non-traditional first generation students understand that clear writing and communication skills are needed in and outside the academic setting.

The fourth code, High amount of writing in major, resulted in responses describing how they felt about the amount of writing that is required within their respective major. The majority of the responses felt that the amount required for their particular major was adequate. Others stated that their major did not require large amounts of writing, but understood the importance of knowing how to write for communication purposes.

The final theme, On-Site Campus Resources, had only one code. The Writing Center was identified by each participant as an on-site campus resource that was extremely valuable. All students stated that they utilized this on-site campus resource while attending the university. Having the writing center as a resource to help assist students with their writing issues has proven to be most valuable to the success and retention rates of students. The writing center concept of student tutors helping their peers with their writing instills the confidence and ownership of one's own writing that is essential for future success of students in academe.

Overall, these students who identify as non-traditional and first generation, have a good understanding about their own writing ability as it relates to academic writing. These results can help educators and administrators become more in tune with the resources and assessments needed to rectify this issue.

Next Steps

Understanding the results from this qualitative study as it relates to non-traditional first generation students' perception of academic writing will help administrators, educators, and other stakeholders realize the importance of writing within post-secondary education. The results from the study did indicate that non-traditional first generation students do possess low-

confidence levels in their academic writing upon entering into the university. It is important to acknowledge this fact so that educators and administrators can develop resources throughout their institution that will be most productive to students' success. Ultimately, it is up to the individual student to be aware of their own writing inabilities and find ways to rectify them. Universities who have student resources available for these types of situations are best practices that will help alleviate this problem. Further discussion of strategies and recommendations on how administrators and educators can resolve the concerns of academic writing will be addressed in Manuscript Three.

MANUSCRIPT THREE

Problem of Practice

University professors are noticing non-traditional first generation students struggling with writing which interferes with their academic success. “What students bring to college matters; this is particularly the case with respect to their academic preparation” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 117). Ideas are not expressed coherently and critical thinking skills are not developed, thus reflecting a poor production of material learned. It is also important to note that “Many urban two- and four-year colleges are ill prepared to deal with the substantial developmental needs that students bring to the classroom” (Engstrom, 2008, p. 6). The initial purpose behind constructing research on the issue of writing perceptions from non-traditional first generation students came about because students expressed verbally their writing concerns as it relates to the demands of university courses. These students, who are transferring into the university, experience issues of being “overwhelmed with information...that they have...forgotten much of the material by the time the first semester rolls around” (Tinto, 2012, p. 16). As these students transition into the university, they should be equipped with the necessary writing skills required at the collegiate level.

The basis behind the development and construction of the conceptual framework focused on the core issues that affect students’ writing abilities specifically those of non-traditional first generation students. The theories used to help explain these issues of concern primarily focused on John Dewey’s Pragmatic Theory; Lev Vygotsky’s Cognitive Theory; Louise Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory; Albert Bandura’s Self-efficacy; and Vincent Tinto’s Learning

Communities. Together, these theories help to better understand the issue of academic writing as a concern for non-traditional first generation students.

Dewey's Pragmatic Theory was used as the central focus to help practitioners understand the necessity of developing practical and functional means within a classroom setting to better examine the nature behind the lack of writing skills from non-traditional first generation students. "Dewey's central insight is that the only way in which we can find out the meaning of immediate experiences is by means of action" (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Educators that instruct with practical means connect ideas with their students making the process of learning more engaging and meaningful. As stated by Biggs and Tang (1999/2011) they "discern three levels of thinking about teaching, each with its own focus: what the student is, what the teacher does and what the student does" (as cited in Hagström & Lindberg, 2012, p. 120). This approach can help to better understand the non-traditional first generation student as a whole.

Along with the Pragmatic Theory approach to learning, Rosenblatt's Transactional theory was used to help recognize the interactions between the student and the written text. "Both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 27). In relationship to how this is also essential for the educator, Rosenblatt (1995) explains, "Literature lends little comfort to the teacher who seeks the security of a clearly defined body of information" (p. 27). Just as it is important for the student to make meaningful connections to the readings, it is also important for the educator to understand the connections made by the student. This transactional approach is evident within student writing as it reflects meaning, thought, and critical thinking from the written work.

Albert Bandura's Self-efficacy Theory is critical and crucial by means of better interpreting the human connection of self-worth and self-improvement on a task or skill like

writing that is in need of improvement. The importance of Bandura's self-efficacy resonates with Vincent Tinto's (2012) explanation of how "Enhanced self-efficacy promotes, in turn, behaviors that further the likelihood of success" (p. 69). Students need to feel empowered within themselves for themselves. Low-confidence levels need to be diminished.

Vygotsky's Cognitive theory is also important for non-traditional first generation students to understand the meaning of the skills needed to critically think and therefore respond to personal ideas about an issue. "Vygotsky's work seems to be helpful to teachers, who as a matter of educational strategy probably should not treat their students as if they are frozen at some definite intellectual state, and thus as if they are incapable of further growth or development" (Phillips & Soltis, 2009, p. 58). Educators who can provide academic confidence within their students can help eradicate this low-confidence issue and push their students to achieve at their highest academic level. "Language is the supreme human 'psychological tool,' making higher forms of learning, problem-solving, and acquisition of many skills possible. And both Vygotsky and Dewey recognized that language is, primarily, a means of communication" (Phillips & Soltis, 2009, p. 59).

Vincent Tinto's Learning Communities informs the importance of communities that encourage social support systems on campus. "Academic involvement in class through the use of cooperative group work, for instance, has been shown to promote social involvement that extends beyond the class" (Tinto, 2012, p. 65). Tinto (2012) further explains that "First-generation and low-income students, for instance, typically lack the sorts of shared knowledge, or cultural capital, that more affluent students...commonly possess about the nature of the college experience and what it takes to succeed" (p. 11). A writing center, also referred to as a student support service, provides a resource for students that fulfills a one-on-one experience for

helping students truly become better writers. The writing center provides an additional means to collectively communicate ideas in an environment that is considered safe and conducive to learning. Community engagement and authentic writing experiences are central to Muriel Harris's 1988 statement which supports writing centers' work: "In the writing center the writer joins a community of writers.... [T]he writing center's role in providing writers with first-hand experience in interacting with readers who can help writers learn about the discourse community for which they are writing."

In addition to Tinto's Learning Communities, Stephen North's article, *The Idea of a Writing Center*, speaks to the notion that "in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (as cited in Barnett & Blummer, 2008, p. 69). When students frequent the writing center, they become more engaged with their own writing equipping them with a sense of ownership that allows for confidence. This confidence provides students with the self-assuredness that they can tackle any writing assignment in their academic discipline that is required of them and know that it is attainable. "As with supplemental instruction, the coherent linking of support activities among courses in the learning community enables students to quickly apply what they learn in the support course to the academic demands of the other courses" (Tinto, 2012, p. 38).

Writing skills became an issue for non-traditional first generation students as it impacted their performance and confidence level. Their lack of basic paragraph development, expressing argument, and defining a clear thesis statement have impacted students' capability for composing clear and developed responses to academic assignments. This study was done to help further understand the nature of these students' perception of their own writing and in turn will suggest ways in which professors, administrators, and other stakeholders may be able to implement

change. As John Dewey states, he “wanted schools to engage students in meaningful activities where they had to work with others on problems. Purposeful activity in social settings was the key to genuine learning in Dewey’s view” (Phillips & Soltis, 2009, p. 56). When administrators and educators collaborate, academic issues can be solved. Further efforts of student support services, like that of the writing center, need to be readily available for all students.

This qualitative study used the responses from non-traditional first generation students which were asked questions concerning their own perceptions of writing. The responses from these questions reflected on the following issues: writing skills were not honed upon arrival to the university resulting in unpreparedness; remembering the MLA and APA format for essay composition; and how to compose a well-developed essay including paragraph development. These students also expressed that being away from the college setting affected their writing as it related to their academic courses, which became a problem of concern. After conducting the qualitative study, the majority of non-traditional first generation students expressed that frequenting the writing center helped them with their writing skills and their confidence. Hearing these concerns and issues from students provoked the research to understand the struggles faced when attending a public university off-campus instructional site. From this qualitative study the researcher wanted to find viable solutions to help non-traditional first generation students overcome these writing concerns.

Summary of Findings

The consensus from the students who partook in the semi-structured interviews on a public university off-campus instructional site claimed that while taking college courses, writing was seen as an obstacle that they knew they had to overcome. All of the students commented on their positive experiences when visiting the writing center as an on-site campus resource that was

available to them. Writing is seen as an area of concern for the majority of these non-traditional first generation students. Expressing the length of the essays required of them, the different formatting guidelines that they had to now use instead of what they were taught before was also an obstacle for them.

Overall, non-traditional first generation students did feel that their writing was a concern upon entering into the university. All students had their own self-efficacy issues and problems when relating to writing in their academic courses. Anxiety and fear were still feelings felt when composing a written assignment yet these feelings resulted in their lack of self-confidence or the simple fact of wanting to be the best student for themselves. It was concluded that the more writing done by non-traditional first generation students the better they became.

Non-traditional first generation students who participated in this qualitative study were assigned a pseudonym to protect the students' identity. The student's pseudonym, major, age, and the date of the interview are listed in Table 6.

Table 6:

| Pseudonym | Major | Age | Date of Interview |
|------------------|---|--------------|--------------------------|
| Christian | General Studies (History, Biology, and Religion) | 26 years old | December 13, 2018 |
| Cara | Elementary Education | 28 years old | April 1, 2019 |
| Terry | General Studies | 38 years old | March 18, 2019 |
| Susan | Social Work | 42 years old | March 25, 2019 |
| Felicia | Accounting | 42 years old | July 30, 2019 |
| Annabel | Accounting | 34 years old | July 30, 2019 |
| Grace | Criminal Justice | 25 years old | September 30, 2019 |
| Stephen | General Studies | 36 years old | September 30, 2019 |

The results from this qualitative study helped to identify the issues faced by non-traditional first generation students. The skills of writing that are not practiced on a regular basis can truly impact the writing performance of a student who has been away from academic writing. “Writing is a very complex neurodevelopmental process” (Grünke & Leonard-Zabel, 2015, p. 138). This gap from being away from the college setting and writing academic papers poses a concern which educators need to be aware of as it relates to their students. Refreshing those writing skills is imperative to help students gain control of their own writing style and process. Ultimately, writing is a process and requires clear thinking for clear communication expressed in written form.

There are ample amounts of literature that focus on strategies for writing but it is imperative for post-secondary educators of all disciplines to integrate these writing strategies

within their curriculum and instruction as writing is not solely required in a writing or composition class. “A recurring theme in a study setting out to explore the writing experience of a group of ‘non-traditional’ students in higher education is that of student confusion about what’s required in their academic writing” (Lillis & Turner, 2001, p. 58).

Improving Practice to Enhance Equity, Ethics, and Social Justice

Throughout higher education, administrators and faculty are constantly trying to find the best approaches to resolving access, equity, and social justice issues that surround students. Developing adequate resources on and off campus have been vital for students’ success in college. Most importantly the issue of communication as it relates to written form is an area that needs more attention and focus in resolving this underlying problem that plagues students in college. It is vital to understand that ideas and thoughts emerging from students help to shape society as a whole. Addressing writing concerns and issues in students from all grade levels, educators can help to facilitate an approach which will instill confidence within to help them so that they can become stronger writers. “Moreover, having demanding faculty who include reading and writing requirements in their courses...is associated with improvement in students’ critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 93). Even if these writing skills are not fully honed during their formative years of academic education, post-secondary educators can still have a huge impact on these students by assessing their writing ability and assisting them on an individual basis. Courses offered by the university for transfer students that are specific to developing writing skills can be beneficial. In an article by Patrick Smith (2018) he states that “four-year universities desire math and writing skills above the others” (p. 5). Non-traditional first generation students have expressed their concerns for being unprepared for academic level writing. These students have openly expressed their concerns

about their own writing confidence level which interferes with their academic performance. Educators are also aware of the lack of quality writing skills that these students encounter which causes concern.

In efforts to improve and enhance university students' experience, the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) of 2011, focused on writing, resulted in the implementation of placing writing centers on the university main campus as well as on two off-campus instructional sites. A unique situation occurred where one university off-campus instructional site shared the same building with a community college off-campus instructional site. Being hired to serve in this role as a writing center director for this particular university off-campus instructional site, it was advantageous to partner with the community college, so that the writing center could service students from both institutions.

In the year of 2017, the QEP on writing was issued for this community college which also stipulated a writing center to be implemented on the community college main campus and their off-campus instructional site. Now having two writing center directors, one for the university and the other for the community college in one building, both writing center directors felt it was important to maintain an inclusive environment by having one writing center which emphasized community engagement.

Having a relaxed and welcoming writing center has helped enhance the partnership between the community college and the university. Further, students who attend classes at the community college and who transfer to the university are now familiar with the student support services that the writing center provides. Sharing space has allowed for shared resources, both among tutors and administrators. Tutors from each institution rely on one another for guidance and feedback; the directors of the shared center collaborate both on programmatic decisions and

on tutor-training. A centerpiece of this collaboration is the mentoring program that pairs the community college and the university tutors to ensure continuity of experience for students, while promoting community among tutors. Student support services such as writing centers, help to scaffold writing techniques that professors may not have the time to address in a lecture classroom. Writing center campus workshops for all university students were created as well to help make writing resources readily available for them. From these efforts it is noted that students must take responsibility within themselves to seek this help that is provided to them. Writing centers implement the support and encouragement students need for refining their writing skills. Both directors felt that supporting a community of writers begins not only with the institutions' student populations but also within secondary schools. By working with secondary school administrators to pilot writing centers at secondary schools within the region, the directors have mobilized the combined resources of the community college and university writing centers to encourage community development and engagement within secondary schools.

Resources for Implementation and Recommendations

Communication of ideas in written and verbal form with good writing practices can help a society grow and prosper. Working together effectively and efficiently is crucial to the development of an ever-changing society. Understanding each other's thoughts can help to overcome many obstacles that prohibit productivity of a society. However, the issue remains that writing has become a problem that needs to be remedied.

As institutions evaluate ways to make a positive change for students in the future it is imperative for administrators, faculty, and staff to work together to improve retention rates.

According to Vincent Tinto (1987):

It requires that institutions rethink traditional ways of structuring collegiate learning environments and find new ways of actively involving students, as well as faculty, in their intellectual life. It requires a deeper understanding of the importance of educational community to the goals of higher education. (p. 212)

Along with Vincent Tinto, “psychologist Diane Ruble (1994) offers a model that ties developmental change to life transitions such as going to college. Transitions are significant because they present new situations about which individuals know little and in which they will experience uncertainty” (Harper & Jackson, 2011, p. 252). The more awareness administrators and faculty can give to this issue, the more inclined higher education will see a change for growth in the population of students.

Recommendation for addressing the details of this social issue of writing as it is seen throughout all classes in higher education, is to help professors understand how to assess and remedy this specific issue. During faculty orientation there could be a time set aside for a workshop designed for faculty to use various types of writing strategies within their classes. This teaching workshop will be specific for all faculty across the disciplines. It will be geared towards encouraging professors to incorporate more writing within their daily instruction, which will consist of ideas that focus on each discipline and writing approaches that those professors can use and require of their students. Other ideas will focus on ways to incorporate short answer responses within an exam or quiz, as well as having small group writing activities. This will not be a mandatory or forced way of telling a teacher how to teach their class, but rather a way to show how a specific lesson could be taught with a writing component. The main message of this workshop would be to remind faculty of the importance of incorporating or addressing writing into the classroom. Some faculty in fields that are not writing specific or do not require writing

may shy away from such a suggestion, but it is important to remind them that students need to have a consistent practice of writing and an avenue for expressing their ideas to help them articulate their points in practical written forms.

Policy makers and educators from both community colleges and universities need to work together to ensure success from their student body. When community colleges and universities offer writing courses that align with student learning outcomes, a smoother transition can occur. It is recommended that students who are transfer students or who have taken a two or more year hiatus from their higher education, are recommended to enroll in a transfer course. This transfer experience course as offered by The University of Mississippi, will incorporate academic writing that will allow for the reeducation of writing skills that need to be refreshed. This academic writing component in the transfer course will embed writing strategies and various academic formats that will help students feel better prepared for the writing workload that is expected and assigned at the university level.

Having a writing center available at every community college and university can promote better student writers which will ultimately enhance the quality of student education. Writing centers are essential for helping students understand the importance of process writing and how to develop their own writing skills. Administrators, staff, and faculty stakeholders can rely on the free tutorial services offered by this on-site student support service. The writing center not only offers free peer to peer tutorial services, it also provides in-class writing workshops for faculty. In-class tutoring has also been done with various courses such as Southern Literature and American History to name a couple. Tutors and writing center directors assisted students in their classes with developing thesis statements and paragraph organization. This in-class tutoring process worked yet some professors realized that the students were not prepared initially with

their ideas for what they wanted to write about so the in-class workshop was not as successful as it could have been.

Recommendations for Outreach Services

It is not very often that you see college professionals, especially writing center directors, enter into a middle school, but during the last week of November 2018, the community college writing center directors and the university off-campus writing center director collaborated with eighth grade educators at a middle school located in the same region to explore how writing centers can impact students at any grade level.

The writing center directors gave mini-writing lessons to various eighth grade students in efforts to encourage and inspire students. Both the community college writing center directors and the university writing center director explained to students the importance of audience and purpose and how description in ones' writing is so important for the reader. This exposure led to students of this age see the importance of writing and the possibilities attending a college or university can offer. The feedback from the middle school students reflected their engagement with writing which bolstered the benefits that writing gave them when expressing their thoughts and ideas. They were intrigued and wanted to learn more. Overall, writing centers provide collaboration with writing among students so that they do not feel alone or isolated during the writing process. Partnering with the community college and middle school was something that generated a positive result from both practitioners and students.

In the future another possibility would be for tutors to outreach their services and give mini-writing lessons or provide one-on-one tutoring one day out of the week to help model the importance of peer review and prewriting skills to other middle or high school students in the surrounding areas. Writing center tutors could also provide writing workshops. This visit from

the writing center directors was done in the hopes of establishing writing centers in the middle schools and high schools across the north region of the state.

Another partnership emerged when the two writing center directors who share a writing center at the off-campus instructional site collaborated and gave a writing workshop on a Saturday to college bound high school students. This invitation has sparked an on-going event that will help the continued promotion of the importance of receiving a college degree and will help to prepare students for their writing requirements seen in college or university level writing.

Practitioner Reflection

Entering into the Higher Education Doctoral program has made me more aware of the obstacles and challenges that students face when entering into college. As a doctoral student, I feel that this program has helped me become a better educator. Each class strengthened my critical thinking and analytical skills. By taking classes throughout this program, I became more educated in understanding the access and affordability issues that students go through just to obtain an education. Knowing these struggles of my students has made me more consciously aware of their personal circumstances as they tackle college. The material taught through this program helped me to delve deeper into issues addressed and think more critically. I began to analyze material in such a way to help articulate a clear message to my audience. Refreshing these skills has helped me be more encouraging to my students and more understanding of their writing concerns and issues.

Knowing that this program encouraged research in practitioner work, I was able to focus on an issue that not only affected my teaching career but that of other college professors. The research that I found has been instrumental in the way I view and assess my students' academic

performance. I am better able to hone in on the core issue and help find strategies that will alleviate these barriers for my students so that they can achieve their tasks.

I feel that writing, grammar skills, and language are all learned throughout the developmental stages of a person's life and therefore a strong adaptation of these skills is formed and applied while enrolled in university classes. It is the lack of using these skills that I feel relates to the writing problems that are seen in the advanced writing class offered at the university to these students. Not utilizing these learned skills and advancing them, creates a gap in this writing process.

While teaching advanced composition at the university off-campus instructional site, I feel students are expressing their frustrations with their own writing skills and feeling underprepared for the level of work expected at the university level compared to the community college level. It is important for me to incorporate various teaching skills and strategies to address different types of learners: the kinesthetic, the auditory, and the visual. Higher order thinking is required and more knowledge of various formatting styles are needed to be known. For example Modern Language Association (MLA) is not the only format style that professors are requiring of their students. American Psychological Association (APA) and Chicago Manual Style (CMS) are also a necessity. As a practitioner of writing, I am curious about how first generation non-traditional students view or perceive their own writing skills upon entering into the advanced writing composition course I teach.

I also strive to implement effective writing strategies that help encourage both independent and collaborative writing within the classroom. These writing strategies will help facilitate deeper thinking and encourage new ideas and thoughts from students. By showing the importance of real-life applications of these required assignments, I believe they will be better

prepared for the job market. One of my primary goals as a teacher is to communicate clearly with each student. Setting aside time to help students with specific questions has been very helpful when teaching research writing. In addition to practicing these skills, meeting with each student for a one-on-one conference to discuss the details of the assignment has proven helpful in their productivity as a writer. I sincerely believe that as a teacher, I want to make certain that my students are being reached at the level of their understanding.

In teaching advanced composition to juniors and seniors, I have learned that many students lack critical writing skills. Teaching non-traditional students, English language learners (ELL), and those students who have not taken a writing class in more than five years, brings its own challenges. As an educator, I also need to possess the skills and tools to help facilitate deeper thinking and encourage new ideas and thoughts from students. By showing the importance of real-life applications of these required assignments, I believe they are much better prepared for the job market. Dewey states, “The sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter into the heart, head and hands of educators, and which by entering in, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more human, more truly educational than it was before” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, n.p.). This statement truly identifies the progressive nature of educators and education as a whole. I believe I accomplish this objective by giving my students plenty of time on task activities with monitored guidance in the beginning of learning a new skill.

As I reflect on my twelve years of teaching writing at the college level, I have come to realize that in the task of writing, students truly learn by doing. Each semester, I continue to hone my own research writing skills and strive to be creative, so that I will have a fresh approach in teaching the joys of writing. Taking this active role, I have been afforded opportunities to speak

about writing techniques needed in college writing courses to college bound high school students. I have also given in-class writing workshops to middle school students in the surrounding areas. Conducting these workshops and presenting at conferences I am constantly improving my professional development skills while learning various ways to integrate writing activities into my class instruction. Being a lifelong learner, I will continue to research innovative and creative ways of engaging my students in the writing process so that they can reach their full potential.

Having in-class one-on-one conferences with students to discuss their essay drafts has been so instrumental in how I assess each student's writing and their writing style. I am able to have a conversation with them about their writing and get a clearer meaning behind the message they want to convey. By doing so, I can help them rephrase a sentence or encourage them to add more detail to develop their thoughts. John Dewey attests to the fact that "The object of foresight of consequences is not to predict the future. It is to ascertain the meaning of present activities and to secure, so far as possible, a present activity with a unified meaning" (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, n.p.). Students who are more connected with their own writing and see the value of process writing are better able to develop themselves as a stronger writer. Enhancing one's own skills is an important aspect of being a college student. Ultimately, learning and understanding at a pace that ensures deeper knowledge.

Throughout the construction of this dissertation manuscript, I was able to present the results of this qualitative study. At the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) 2019 conference, my writing center colleagues and I presented our individual research in a presentation entitled, "The Art of Action Research." Being able to share my findings helped me to connect with other educators. Sharing these students' statements about their own writing

issues created more discussion on how these challenges are not isolated to one university.

Academic writing concerns from students effects all educators and administrators to seek some resolution to this problem.

Prior to the dissertation, I had the opportunity to present with my fellow university writing center directors on building alliances with multi-campus writing centers on the university campuses at the 2017 International Writing Center Conference. Following that presentation, the university campus writing center directors were invited to speak at the 2018 Center for Excellence Teaching and Learning luncheon to university professors about how the writing center is a support service that helps the writing needs of their students. In that same year, I presented at the university main campus' Transitioning to College Writing Symposium on ways that community college writing centers and university writing centers work collaboratively to help improve student writing. This presentation led to another which focused on the topic of expanding communities and social engagement in the writing center, presented at the International Writing Center Association conference. In addition to presenting, I have been able to attend a professional development workshop called The Writing Project Summer Institute for Teachers which introduces various writing techniques to implement into the classroom.

Dissemination of Findings

The core values of an academic leader focuses on the needs of the students. By listening to and understanding the concerns of students, leaders can identify what changes need to be made. Providing accessibility for students is imperative for success in their academic future. Having resources available for students both on and off campus that adhere to the diverse student body will ensure a successful outcome. Leaders who consult and conference with students are more inclined to understand their needs and desires. It is critical for academic leaders who are

also educators to provide opportunities for students to grow and expand in their understanding of the material being taught. Students who are more connected with their own academic learning often achieve a level of investment that allows them to see the value and potential of their academic success which ultimately leads to learning and understanding in a way that ensures deeper knowledge.

In the academic years ahead the university student tutors who speak to high school students about the opportunities working at a writing center, would be one way to increase our student enrollment at The University of Mississippi DeSoto regional campus. It would also give the tutors exposure to speaking publicly about their professional role at the university. The writing center tutorial service has face-to-face tutoring for all students as well as online synchronous chat services. In 2017, the university's Department of Writing and Rhetoric helped the writing centers add the option of correspondence asynchronous tutoring so that non-traditional students or those students who were unable to visit the writing center during hours of operation, would have the opportunity to have their writing reviewed.

In an effort to market the writing center on the university campus, student tutors have created accounts on social media to help spread the word about the writing center services. They have shared grammar lessons and other writing posts that students and faculty can view.

Summary of Manuscript

The overall development of the Problem of Practice began with the concerns heard by both the faculty and the students on how either writing concerns have inflicted upon their work or that the level of writing required in the academic setting is too overwhelming where they feel unprepared. Advanced composition courses taught to juniors and seniors, as well as other courses offered on the off-site instructional campus allow educators to see writing issues and

concerns firsthand. Educators who witness such issues need to develop strategies to help these students succeed. Administrators and educators who are aware that writing skills in students who attend college need to be addressed as a social justice issue. By focusing on how educators can encourage or support students struggling with their own writing skills can be a practice that involves the educators to find resources on or off campus that help support their students. Critical thinking skills go hand in hand with writing skills and reading skills. Good writers are good readers, therefore, it is imperative to address a student's literacy rate as well. Often students are confused by upper level reading material because they have not established the basic phonetic and comprehension skills needed for reading. When students fail to understand the material being taught, they become lost and withdrawn from the subject. In the book, "Daring to Lead," the author, Brené Brown (2018) explains to teachers that they "must be guardians of a space that allows students to breathe and be curious and explore the world and be who they are without suffocation....It can and often does change the trajectory of their life" (p. 13). Educators need to be aware of their student population as it relates to the various writing and reading skills of their students.

Educators who understand the equity issues of being mindful of each of their students' success and productivity in the classroom and in other academic courses will help students find the will and drive to be successful and achieve their ultimate goals. More specifically, first generation non-traditional students are having to face obstacles from time spent away from writing which becomes a challenge for them to articulate their message in written form clearly for the assigned coursework. Educators who understand the ethical importance of encouraging support and providing adequate resources for students who view writing as a challenge will only help instead of hinder a student to achieve their very best in their academic career. It is through

the assessment by the educator that these students can get the help they need. Resources such as the writing center provide such access that addresses ethics, equity and social justice.

Utilizing effective teaching strategies that promote and encourage critical thinking in their academic writing is also key for student attainment. Finding ways to connect students with resources whether at an on-site campus student resource, such as the writing center or other student support services on or off campus, helps students in their academic career. Students need to feel confident and secure in their ability to complete an assignment. Educators and administrators who have both patience and compassion for these students is very important to their ultimate success.

Having taught in a university setting, I am constantly aware of the struggles my students face with writing. They verbally express to me, in my advanced composition class, that they are not equipped with the writing skills necessary for this class. They express that they have never used the APA format before, only MLA. Once they realize that this class is researching ethical issues in their field, they feel overwhelmed with finding and understanding academic scholarly articles. As an instructor, I am constantly having to find teachable moments to help my students craft their own writing in a way that takes it section by section. Creating activities that help them formulate a well working thesis is also helpful. I feel it is imperative for educators to understand the writing concerns of students. When incorporating small writing activities within classroom discussion, students seem to resonate well with the task and skill being taught. Making writing an activity that is obtainable for students will help them develop their writing skills.

Overall, non-traditional students feel apprehensive with their own views of writing especially writing in an academic setting. Non-traditional students express their feelings of writing inadequacy due to the lack of writing in an academic setting. Being out of the classroom

for such a long time, their writing skills are not as strong as they could be if they had been writing consistently. Most non-traditional students have had jobs or are in current jobs that do not require extensive writing skills. It is upon entering college and having to complete academic essays and research papers that these students feel underprepared for the workload that is involved. Ultimately, if non-traditional students utilize the free writing services available on their campus, they will be better equipped to accomplish their goals and obtain the necessary writing skills needed so that they can become a successful student.

Written communication, as it is practiced and perfected, can be a powerful tool for students to articulate their views. Higher education is the platform for students to spring board their ideas to make a difference in society. Students who are able to communicate clearly and coherently are able to express their views which is essential for developing individual thinkers and motivators. Universities and colleges allow for such an experience where students can grow and flourish individually and professionally.

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APPENDIX

Appendix I

Title: Perceptions of Academic Writing from First Generation Non-traditional Students:

A Qualitative Study

Interview Questions

Researcher: Jeanine Rauch

Date:

Interviewee:

Location:

I. Are you 25 years of age or older?

A:

I. Have either of your parents graduated from a college or university?

A:

I. How have your past experiences with writing prepared you for writing at the university?

A:

I. How do you feel about the level of writing required in your discipline?

A:

I. What is the amount of writing required in your major?

A:

I. How do you currently feel about the quality and level of your own writing?

A:

I. How prepared do you feel for the level of writing required at the university?

A:

I. How much do you value your writing ability?

A:

I. Can you give me an example of where you have best demonstrated your writing skills?

A:

I. What on-site campus resources are you aware of that could help improve your writing skills? If so, what were your experiences using these resources?

A:

VITA

Margaret Jeanine Rauch

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

- 2017-Present The University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi
Education Doctorate of Higher Education
Expected Graduation date May 2020
- 2006-2007 Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi
Masters of Secondary Education English
Completed 24 hours of English courses
- 1998-2002 Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas
Bachelors of English with an emphasis on Creative Writing Poetry

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2017-Present Writing Center Director and Lecturer for The University of Mississippi-DeSoto campus. Students are hired and trained to be writing consultants from The University of Mississippi-DeSoto. Facilitate weekly writing consultant development and staff meetings with Regional Coordinator. Teach Writing 250 Applied Writing course and WRIT 310 Business Writing to juniors and seniors.
- 2011-2017 Writing Center Director and Instructor for The University of Mississippi-DeSoto campus. Students are hired and trained to be writing consultants from both Northwest Community College and The University of Mississippi-DeSoto. Facilitate weekly writing consultant development and staff meetings with Regional Coordinator. Teach Writing 250 Applied Writing course to juniors and seniors.
- 2011-2007 Instructor of English for Alcorn State University. Taught freshman level Intermediate Composition, Basic Composition I & II. Studies in Literature, and Adolescent Literature. Chaired New Faculty Committee, Chaired Basic Composition I & II Committee.

- 2011-2008 Assistant Director of Writing Center at Alcorn State University. Trained student tutors on the tutoring process. Promoted Writing Center services throughout the campus and facilitated tutor/student tutorials.
- 2010-2009 Part-Time Instructor of English for Hinds Community College. Taught Composition classes during summer sessions.
- 2008-2006 Core Arts Poetry Teacher for the Janice Wyatt Summer Arts Institute in Cleveland, MS. Taught creative writing poetry to students ranging from middle school to high school age. Taught Public Speaking skills for final presentation of their poems.
- 2007 Faculty tutor for Alcorn State University Writing Center. Guided students in the revision process of their essays. Implemented strategies and techniques for students throughout the writing process.
- 2007 English Composition Teacher for the Mississippi Delta Arts and Heritage Summer Experience in Cleveland, MS. Taught incoming college freshman how to compose a well-developed Composition Level I essay. Writing strategies and techniques were discussed and practiced.
- 2007-2006 Graduate Assistant for Delta State University. Assisted college-level classes with strategies and techniques in comprehending British Literature works in poetry. Writing Center tutor.
- 2006 Elementary School Teacher for the Presbyterian Day School in Cleveland, MS. Taught third graders the subjects of Spelling, Language Arts and Social Studies.
- 2005 Staff Writer for the Bolivar Commercial Newspaper in Cleveland, MS. Typed up daily column for the Obituary section. Wrote articles for the “Person of Interest” page and “Pet of the Week.”
- 2005-2003 Assessment Test Team Leader/Customer Relations for Harcourt Publishing Company in San Antonio, TX. Trained readers to use the rubrics for assessment tests. Monitored reader’s results for consistency. Directed customers to relevant information concerning Pharmacy College Admissions Test (PCAT) exam.

COURSE HIGHLIGHTS

WRIT 399 Special Topics: A course that provides students the opportunity to explore professional writing in a location that is not in a classroom setting. Hosted by the STUDY USA program of The University of Mississippi Outreach Division, this course was held in Austin, TX. Students in this location, explore the sights and then write professional essay assignments on their experiences accompanied by a multimodal presentation.

WRIT 310 Business Writing: A course that provides students basic principles of rhetoric and composition applied to professional writing. Rhetoric of the workplace, electronic contexts, page design, research tools and practices, genres and conventions, and professional style.

WRIT 250 Advanced Writing: A course extending the skills of academic writing and research established in first-year writing. Students analyze readings of increasing complexity, write in a variety of genres, construct ePortfolios, compose presentations with electronic tools, and choose their fields of emphases for research projects. This course builds on the reading and writing skills learned in WRIT 100/101 and WRIT/LIBA 102, focusing on a more advanced level, with more attention to argument, logic, rhetoric, and writing in the disciplines.

EN 406 Adolescents Literature: A course introducing English Education majors to literature commonly read by adolescents of varying cultures. The course requires in-class study (including adolescent reading process and language-skill development) and field experience (including development of an annotated bibliography of works suitable for adolescents). Prerequisite: EN 213.

EN 213 Studies in Literature: An introductory course in literature with variable content. The Nature of major genres and important literary terms will be emphasized. Pre-requisite: EN 112.

EN 112 Basic Composition: A course that focuses on the principles of grammar, rhetoric, and composition with attention given to expository and argumentative prose through the use of innovative and creative techniques. An additional emphasis is placed on the methods of research and the preparation of research essays. Pre-requisite: EN 111.

EN 111 Basic Composition: A course that aims to develop proficiency in the related skills of reading, writing, and discussion through the use of innovative and creative techniques. An emphasis is placed on standard usage through intensive study of sentence construction, paragraph building, essay structures, and grammar. Pre-requisite: Placement as determined by entrance examination, or EN 105.

EN 105 Intermediate Composition: A course for the students who exhibit marginal skills in English but are not prepared for college composition. The emphasis is on exhibiting standard usage in students' writing. Upon successful completion on EN 105, students are prepared to enter EN 111.

UNIVERSITY SERVICE

2020 Young Writer's Conference-National Writing Project-Poetry Workshop for Middle School students

2019 Young Writer's Conference-National Writing Project-Poetry Workshop for High School students

- 2019 “Speaker’s Edge” judge for University of Mississippi Business School
- 2018 Writing Center Orientation to various UM DeSoto faculty classes
- 2017 Writing Center Orientation to Education class for Dr. Amber McCullough, Reformation History class for Dr. Mindy Rice, Criminal Justice class for Dr. Johnson, and Marketing class for Dr. Bud Hamilton
- 2017 “Speaker’s Edge” judge for University of Mississippi School of Business
- 2016 UM article write-“Schools to DeSoto for Writing Center Insight”
- 2106 Focus Group for Professional Writing Minor-Desoto students
- 2016 Workshop on Resume and Cover Letter for Social Work majors pursuing internships: Dr. Yi Jin Kim, The University of Mississippi-Desoto
- 2015 Workshop on Resume for Social Work majors: Dr. Desiree Stepteau-Watson. The University of Mississippi-Desoto
- 2015 Workshop on Resume for Nursing majors: Tamara Pitman, Northwest Community College
- 2015 Workshop on Teaching e-Portfolio: Dr. Cindy Hale, The University Mississippi-Desoto
- 2015-2017 Member of Professional Writing Minor
- 2015-2017 Member of Gender Neutral Pronoun Committee
- 2014-present Member of National Council of Teachers English (NCTE), Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)
- 2014-2017 Teaching Circle Leader
- 2014-present Observed WRIT 250, WRIT 101 and 102 instructors for Professional Development purposes.
- 2014-present EDHE 301 Career and Life Planning Assisted Dr. Jonathan Harrington with mock interviews and helped students Resume and Cover Letter
- 2013-2016 PRAXIS Study Prep

- 2013 Resume and Cover Letter presentation for NWCC nursing students: Regina Clark, Northwest Community College
- 2013 Congratulatory message at Alpha Sigma Lambda ceremony
- 2012-present Focus Groups for Faculty and students on the Desoto campus
- 2012 Workshop on Resume, Cover Letter and Interview Skills to Teach for America Teachers
- 2011-present Member of The University of Mississippi TutorCon planning Committee
- 2011-present Member of WRIT 250 Committee
- 2011-present Member of Writing Center Directors' Meeting
- 2011-present Member of Transitioning to College Symposium
- 2011-present Orientations to NWCC and UM-DeSoto about the Writing Center Services
- 2011-present Resume and cover letter presentation for UM-DeSoto Career Services

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- 2019 *“Know Your Neighbors: Writing Centers Building Community through Outreach Engagement,”* Transitioning to College Writing (TCW), Oxford, MS
- 2019 *“Ecologies of Absence: Responding to Death in the Writing Center with Empathy and Care,”* International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), Columbus, OH
- 2019 *“The Art of Action Research,”* International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), Columbus, OH
- 2018 *“Teamwork Makes the Dream Work: Expanding Communities and Social Engagement in the Writing Centers,”* International Writing Center Association (IWCA), Atlanta, GA
- 2018 *“It Takes a Village,”* Transitioning to College Writing Symposium, Oxford, MS
- 2018 *CETL Luncheon for UM Faculty Learning about the Writing Center Services,* Center for Teaching and Learning Oxford, MS
- 2017 *“The Case for Building Alliances: Decoding Multicampus Writing Center Work,”* International Writing Center Association (IWCA), Chicago, IL

- 2017 *“Constructive Friction in the Writing Center,”* Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA) and TutorCon, Millsaps College, Jackson, MS
- 2016 *“Toward a Transfer State of Mind,”* Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA) and TutorCon, Starkville, MS
- 2016 *“Inspiring Action by Enabling Agency in Interdisciplinary Advanced Writing Courses,”* Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Houston, TX
- 2015 *“We’re not in Kansas anymore! Overcoming the silo effect of multi-campus Writing Centers,”* Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA) and TutorCon, Oxford, MS
- 2014 *“Maintaining Professionalism and Accepting Differences,”* Mississippi Writing Center (MSWCA) and TutorCon, Oxford, MS
- 2014 *“First Year Writing for Transfer Students,”* Transitioning to College Writing Symposium, Oxford, MS
- 2014 *“The Wonderful World of TutorCon: The Birth and Evolution of a Regional Peer Tutoring Conference,”* International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) and National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, Orlando, FL
- 2013 *“Beginning or Expanding a Writing Center”* and *“Basic Writers in the Writing Center,”* Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA), Clinton, MS
- 2012 *Resume and Cover Letter Writing and Interviewing Skills,* Teach for America Teachers, Oxford, MS
- 2011 *Needs and Wants” Roundtable discussion co-facilitated on teaching writing in secondary and post-secondary setting,* Transitioning to College Writing Symposium, Oxford, MS
- 2010 *“Embedding Grammar in Literacy”* Mississippi Writing Project, Natchez, MS
- 2010 *“Embedding Grammar in Literacy”* Mississippi Writing Project, Alcorn, MS

CONFERENCES

- 2019 National Writing Project, Greenville, NC
- 2019 International Writing Center Association (IWCA), Columbus, OH
- 2018 Transitioning to College Writing Symposium, Oxford MS

- 2018 International Writing Center Association (IWCA), Atlanta, GA
- 2017 International Writing Center Association (IWCA), Chicago, IL
- 2017 Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA), Jackson, MS
- 2017 Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA), Oxford, MS
- 2016 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Houston, TX
- 2015 Mississippi Writing Center Association, Oxford, MS
- 2014 International Writing Center Association (IWCA), Orlando, FL
- 2013 Mississippi Writing Center Association, Clinton, MS
- 2011-present Transitioning to College Symposium, Oxford, MS
- 2011-present TutorCon-Tutor Conference, Oxford, MS
- 2011 International Writing Center Association (IWCA), Summer Institute, Lone Wolf, OK
- 2011 Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), Baton Rouge, LA
- 2010 Mississippi Writing Project, Natchez, MS
- 2010 Mississippi Writing Project, Alcorn, MS

WORKSHOPS

- 2019 Transitioning to College Writing Workshop-High Schools student from the North Mississippi Region, Brown Baptist Church, Southaven, MS
- 2018 Transitioning to College Writing Workshop-High Schools student from the North Mississippi Region, Brown Baptist Church, Southaven, MS
- 2018 Writing Workshop-Hernando Middle School 8th graders
- 2018 The University of Mississippi Writing Project-Summer Institute for Teachers