

**Title:** Toward Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation of the Teaching of Writing in Local High Schools

**Faculty member:** Dr. Crystal N. Fodrey, Assistant Professor of English and Director of Writing at Moravian

**Student on project:** Gabrielle Stanley

**Start and End Date:** Monday, May 14 to Friday, August 10 with Gabrielle working approximately 30.8 hours per week.

**Description of Project:**

Leading theorists in rhetorical genre studies (a subfield of Writing Studies) argue that genres specific to certain subject areas/disciplines should be learned in context. They also argue that to develop into rhetorically flexible “good writers,” students not only need to have a solid foundation of content knowledge from which to draw but also a well scaffolded writing process in place that gives students the ability to develop the reflective habits of mind connected to genre and rhetorical awareness (that is, the ability to analyze situations and make decisions on the best, most context-appropriate ways to reach certain audiences with specific messages using the conventions of the most appropriate genres). This, then, assists students in gaining proficiency in high-road transfer of their writing knowledge and abilities (that is, the ability to abstract and apply that knowledge and those abilities in new settings). While a tall order, this type of learning transfer is possible. As Peter Felton (2017) notes, “Well-structured writing assignments foster the application of disciplinary knowledge in complex contexts and the development of metacognitive awareness, challenging students to use their knowledge proactively” (p. 51). However, a substantial amount of research regarding the entry-level writing abilities of traditional-aged college undergraduates conducted over the last three decades in Writing Studies illustrates that a majority of students arrive to college ill prepared to write effectively in situations that do not call for the two most ubiquitous formats taught in high school: the five-paragraph essay—what Susan Naomi Bernstein and Elizabeth Lowry (2017) explain as “widely believed to be useful in terms of making students assimilate, absorb, store, categorize, and organize new knowledge, but . . . not useful in terms of getting students to actually use that knowledge creatively or critically for productive problem posing and solving” (p. 214)—or the research paper—a type of writing that Elizabeth Wardle (2009) refers to as one of many commonly assigned “mutt genres,” that is, “genres that do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful” (p. 777). An assumption can therefore be made that a substantial number of high school graduates enter their undergraduate college years at a writing ability level that could be improved if only knowledge from the field of writing studies could reach those trained to teach high school students and have an effect on the curricula and pedagogies utilized across subject areas in secondary education.

After reading scholarship that debunked myths perpetuated about writing in high school while a student in Dr. Fodrey's Fall 2017 Special Topics English course Intro to Writing Arts, Gabrielle Stanley decided to develop her discourse community research project with a line of inquiry that would allow her to better understand how Lehigh Valley area high school teachers from across various subject areas both learn to write the genres expected of them as teachers (e.g, lesson plans, assessment reports, and communication with parents) as well as the genres connected to their subject areas that they should understand well enough to teach to their students. She teamed up with the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) research initiative, then working with the Education Department, to create and distribute a survey to local high school teachers about the writing they do and the writing instruction they received. While most of the questions she asked led to answers that did not go beyond what she had already assumed, one question, and its answers, really stood out. The following is from Gabrielle's final report, starting with the last survey question:

“What writing courses did you have to take in college in order to get your teaching certification? How well did those courses teach you to write for your profession? How well did those courses teach you to teach your students to write in your subject/discipline?”

This was one of the questions for which I expected drastically different responses, but they turned out to be more similar than the responses for any other question. The general consensus is this: Education programs have not been properly equipping prospective teachers with the skills to teach writing. While it is possible that this could have changed (as all of the teachers who submitted responses have been teaching for at least six years), I fear that upon further research I may find similar data. One teacher (the math teacher) wrote very concisely “Composition and Research. Not very well!” The unfortunate truth is that today's teachers are taught to expect certain criteria in their students' writing, but they are not taught how to help their students meet that criteria. This creates frustration on both sides: teachers are upset that their students are not meeting their requirements, and students are upset because they don't know what their teacher wants from them.

Through WEC, Gabrielle's finding was presented to Moravian's Education Department. The Education Department is already making changes to the curriculum to get secondary education preservice teachers across all content areas thinking more critically about how they will help their students understand how to communicate effectively within and beyond that content area.

Through SOAR, Gabrielle hopes to expand her research to learn more about what local high school teachers know about the teaching writing—from assignment design, scaffolding, response, and assessment—to why the five-paragraph essay is so ubiquitous to what teachers value in student writing to what additional training or other resources, if any, they might want to improve their ability to teach subject-area specific

writing in genres that respond to real rhetorical situations. To do this, she and Dr. Fodrey will engage in an ethnographic research process (which will need both HSIRB approval and site approval from the principals of the selected high schools), first conducting interviews and/or focus groups with teachers across content areas from local high schools and collecting writing assignments and writing-related lesson plans from them before school is out of session. After the interview data has been transcribed and coded and the writing assignments and lesson plans have been analyzed, Gabrielle will design a survey with Dr. Fodrey that will go out to students in secondary education teacher certification programs at LVAIC colleges in mid-summer, asking questions developed out of what was learned from the qualitative data analysis. Once the data is triangulated, the research findings will be written up for various public and scholarly audiences.

### **References**

- Bernstein, S. N., & Lowry, E. (2017). The five-paragraph essay transmits knowledge. In C. E. Ball & D. M. Loewe (Eds.), *Bad ideas about writing*. Morgantown, West Virginia, West Virginia University Libraries Digital Publishing Institute.
- Felton, P. (2017). Writing high impact practices: Developing proactive knowledge in complex contexts. In J. L. Moore & R. Bass (Eds.), *Understanding writing transfer: Implications for transformative student learning in higher education*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus.
- Wardle, E. (2009). "Mutt genres" and the goal of FYC: Can we help students write the genres of the university? *College Composition and Communication*, 60(4), 765-789.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Faculty and Student, Presented as Timetable :** **March:**

Dr. Fodrey will create a reading list for Gabrielle with a few texts that will need to be read prior to the research design phase but mostly can be read as appropriate throughout the process. Gabrielle will create an annotated bibliography of all of the scholarship she reads for this project.

### **April:**

The initial research design of the qualitative portion of the study will be collaborative and will need to take place during the month of April so that HSIRB paperwork can be submitted prior to the end of the Spring 2018 semester.

### **May 14 - June 8:**

Gabrielle and Dr. Fodrey will set up focus groups at the local high schools where we have gained permission to conduct research. After the first couple of focus groups, Gabrielle will be permitted to run them on her own. Note: We must start so early because we need as much time as possible before the end of the Bethlehem Area School District's academic year on June 8.

**June 11 - July 6:**

Gabrielle and Dr. Fodrey will engage in qualitative data analysis with the transcriptions of the interviews/focus groups and collected course materials. The first week of this will include intensive study of qualitative data analysis (i.e., coding) methods more in depth than what was covered in Intro to Writing Arts. The following weeks will involve acclimation with coding software, grounded theory coding, and findings report writing, which will lead to the survey.

**July 9 - July 13:**

Gabrielle and Dr. Fodrey will develop the survey that will go out to students in secondary education teacher certification programs at LVAIC colleges in mid-summer, asking questions developed out of what was learned from the qualitative data analysis. We will need to add this to the (hopefully) HSIRB-approved project.

**July 16 - July 27:**

The survey, created on and distributed from Qualtrics, is distributed. Gabrielle sends out reminders for people to take survey. They will work on scholarly and/or public writing projects related to what we learned from the qualitative data analysis.

**July 30 - August 10:**

Gabrielle and Dr. Fodrey analyze survey results and add that data point into their findings. Continue working on scholarly and/or public writing projects related to their findings. Seek ways to contribute to various local, statewide, and national education communities.

**Discipline-appropriate Research:**

Writing Studies is a multidisciplinary field, drawing from rhetorical arts; the study of context-based writing processes, genres, and instruction; and the study of the place of writing in educational institutions, as well as in areas such as knowledge/skills transfer, student success, and lifelong learning. This project asks the student-researcher to familiarize herself with current writing studies scholarship, especially as it relates to secondary teacher training, writing in the disciplines, rhetorical genre studies, and knowledge/skills transfer. Gabrielle has already received some instruction in this area after taking a Writing Studies-related course, Intro to Writing Arts, but we will still need to spend some time developing her knowledge base in this area.

**Contributions to the Community:**

Gabrielle and Dr. Fodrey hypothesize that the data will show a need for greater support regarding current writing instruction and future teacher training in writing pedagogy. Gabrielle then hopes that she can use what we learn from the data to make arguments to the local school districts as well as the Pennsylvania Department of Education about what high school teachers need to help their students become college-ready/effective communicators. Dr. Fodrey hopes to use this data to inform the Writing-Enriched Curriculum research initiative in the future, providing details from the study to faculty in disciplines in which secondary education students major. This, in turn, could have a

direct effect on how subject area-specific writing is taught in the high schools where Moravian College graduates find employment. She also hopes to use this information as further exigence for the funding and development of the Greyhound Writers initiative, a writing tutoring program she aspires to develop at local high schools, to be run by Moravian College Writing Fellows in tandem with high school juniors and seniors. Additionally, Dr. Fodrey and Gabrielle plan to publish on the research findings.

## **SOAR Summer Project Student Statement of Purpose**

**Title of Project:** Toward Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation of the Teaching of Writing in Local High Schools

**Student Researcher:** Gabrielle Stanley, English Major, Expected Graduation Date: May 2021

**Faculty Mentor:** Dr. Crystal N. Fodrey

**On Campus Housing:** No

### **Discussion of Rationale:**

During my first semester at Moravian I completed a course called “Introduction to Writing Arts,” which was taught by Dr. Fodrey. Throughout the course I learned a lot about the processes that are involved in writing both at the professional and amateur level, as well as the complexities involved in genre studies and discourse communities. For the final project, the class was assigned to conduct research and write an ethnography about a discourse community of their choice. I decided to survey high school teachers in order to better understand the differences between what genres are used to communicate both with students and each other depending on what subject they teach. One of the questions I asked was “What writing courses did you have to take in college in order to get your teaching certification? How well did those courses teach you to write for your profession? How well did those courses teach you to teach your students to write in your subject/discipline?”, which prompted responses that were very interesting to me. Every teacher admitted that they did not feel adequately prepared to teach (or assess) writing to their students. This was alarming to me, and during the process of writing my ethnography I became very passionate about the gap that seems to exist in writing education. Through SOAR, and with the help of Dr. Fodrey, I would like to expand this research to find out if the disconnect between writing and teacher education is a widespread issue. The data I collect could lead to a change in the Pennsylvania education system, and help students better learn how to communicate through writing, which is a vital skill in our society.

Working on a SOAR project would also allow me to explore a more academic side of my field of interest. I decided to major in English because of my interest in Creative Writing, and although I recognize that it is difficult to make a living off of creative writing, I thought little about what else I could do within the English field. The change that I want to set into motion through this project will take years to accomplish, and my passion for this project has allowed me to see for the first time a path for my future. Before writing my ethnography, I hadn’t even considered grad school, but it is becoming increasingly appealing to me, as I know that furthering my education will help me to build credibility and enact real change. SOAR could be the beginning of that journey for me.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The research done in this project could potentially lead to major improvements of how writing is taught in the state of Pennsylvania. The hope is that this project will start a conversation that is seemingly yet to be had: What is the most effective way to teach writing across the curriculum at the secondary level? How can students be prepared to write in genres outside of the five-paragraph essay? With Dr. Fodrey's help, I aim to identify the shortcomings of the current pedagogical strategies, why those shortcomings exist, and how they may be resolved. The results of an in-depth ethnographic study of how writing is taught and how educators are learning to teach writing will provide important insight that can later be shared with the local school districts and even the Pennsylvania Department of Education, potentially changing how the state views writing education for the better.

## **SOAR Summer Project Expense Proposal**

### **Project Title**

Toward Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation of the Teaching of Writing in Local High Schools

### **Faculty Mentor**

Dr. Crystal N. Fodrey

### **Student**

Gabrielle Stanley

### **Itemized List of Expenses**

Book budget	\$125.00
Gas costs for traveling to high schools	\$ 25.00
Amazon gift cards to survey participants ~25 @ ~\$10.00 per gift card	<u>\$250.00</u>
	\$400.00

### **Justification of Expenses**

First, Gabrielle will need to purchase several Writing Studies research methods books (TBD), and this would allow her to be reimbursed for some of her book buying expenses. Most books of Writing Studies scholarship run between \$30.00 and \$45.00 apiece, so \$125.00 seems adequate for this. Gabrielle and Dr. Fodrey will also be driving to schools in the Lehigh Valley (TBD) to conduct focus groups/interviews and would like to be reimbursed for gas money. Since we are planning to stay within BASD and the surrounding districts, \$25.00 seems adequate for that expense. Finally, as a possible reward for taking the survey, we plan to distribute \$10.00 Amazon gift cards to 25 randomly selected survey participants. This is an effort to increase our survey response rate, which is necessary given how infrequently members our survey population are likely to check their emails in July.