

Application for 2019 SOAR Summer Research Grant

Project Title

Understanding How Students' Conceptions of Writing Change after the First Year of College

Faculty member

Meg Mikovits, Writing Center and Writing Fellows Program Coordinator

Student on project

Gabrielle Stanley, English Major, Expected Graduation May 2021

Start and End Date

April 29, 2019 through July 19, 2019 (this modified timeline is explained in further detail below)

Description of Project

Recent research in the field of writing studies shows that an individual student's theory of writing is related to that student's ability to successfully transfer writing knowledge from one context to another—for instance, from a first-year writing class to disciplinary writing courses in history, biology, psychology, accounting, and literature (Yancey et al., 2018; Beaufort, 2007). To develop an effective theory of writing requires a student to understand how rhetorical knowledge (i.e., an understanding of audience, purpose, context, and genre) is enacted in writing, and to practice the metacognitive skills necessary to critically reflect on the rhetorical choices they make in their own writing. These connections have been demonstrated by numerous writing studies scholars working to understand how best to facilitate writing transfer (Moore & Bass, 2017; Anson & Moore, 2017; Portanova, Rifenburg, & Roen, 2018), and this research informed the Writing At Moravian Advisory Committee's 2016 revision of student learning outcomes for First-Year Writing (FYW)¹ courses.

At this juncture, however, it is clear that in order for Writing At Moravian to more effectively administer the First-Year Writing program, and for individual instructors to more effectively teach within the program, it is important that we understand the specific attitudes about writing our students bring with them to Moravian. How do students' theories of writing developed in high school complement or conflict with the college-level writing abilities promoted in First-Year Writing and disciplinary writing contexts? How can faculty who teach First-Year Writing—often students' first point of contact with college-level writing expectations—better address the needs of their first-year student writers?

To answer these questions, Gabrielle Stanley will (after securing HSIRB approval) analyze summer writing assignments from the class of 2022—both the "Transition to College" email to students' FYW professors and the "Encountering Hiroshima" InFocus essay. All of our approximately 450 incoming students are asked to complete these summer assignments

¹ Throughout this proposal we use "First-Year Writing" or "FYW" to refer to any course at Moravian for which students receive Linc F1 credit, since all of these courses work towards the same set of student learning outcomes. Though First-Year Writing Seminar (Linc 101) is the most common way students earn F1 credit, others complete College Reading and Writing II (Linc 191), College Writing Seminar (WRIT 100), or College Reading and Writing for Multilingual Learners II (WRIT 191).

each year, which means that we have a wealth of largely unexamined student writing artifacts that may be a source of valuable information about our students' attitudes towards writing. Additionally, Gabrielle will administer a survey to the class of 2022 (the same students whose summer writing will be analyzed) asking them to respond to open-ended prompts about what they consider to be characteristics of good writing and whether or how their understanding of "good writing" has changed in their first year of college.

Gabrielle and I have identified several necessary stages to this research process:

1. First, we will use a grounded theory approach to conduct qualitative analysis of students' "Transition to College" summer writing email assignments, in which students are asked to respond to the following prompt:

Based on what you have learned about writing thus far in your education, what are the characteristics of good writing? How do you know when writing is good? Describe a piece of "good writing" that you have composed in the past and the process that you underwent to produce that writing (including, but not limited to, critical reading, research, drafting, and revision).

Aggregate analysis of these documents will identify what our incoming students identify as characteristics of good writing, leading us to understand the theories of writing students developed in their high school writing experiences. Coding, in this and other stages of research, will be done with ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program.

2. Gabrielle will analyze student responses to the "Encountering Hiroshima" InFocus essay writing samples to determine whether individual students' self-identified characteristics of good writing are enacted in their "Encountering Hiroshima" essays.
3. Gabrielle and Meg will create a set of codes based on current FYW student learning outcomes and Gabrielle will apply those codes in her analysis of summer writing samples in order to determine whether and how incoming students are already demonstrating college writing readiness, regardless of whether they have articulated those writing skills and strategies as "good writing."
4. Gabrielle will analyze the results from the survey given to the class of 2022 and compare students' April/May 2019 thoughts about good writing to their original responses, written in summer 2018. This analysis will demonstrate how students' theories of writing may have changed throughout their first year of college.

This SOAR project has the potential to further strengthen writing initiatives on our campus, particularly in the context of First-Year Writing. We hypothesize that the data available to us via already completed student summer writing assignments and data to be collected via survey will, upon close analysis, highlight areas of disconnect between how incoming first-year students think about and value writing skills and abilities and the writing these students will be expected to do in FYW and other disciplinary writing contexts. Ultimately, we hope that the findings of this research will allow us to quantify weaknesses in student writing abilities that we know, anecdotally, to be widespread issues and to recommend curricular and pedagogical adjustments that could help improve the overall writing performance of first-year students.

References

- Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (Eds.). (2015). *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
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- Beaufort, A. (2007). *College writing and beyond: A new framework for university writing instruction*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Moore, J. L., & Bass, R. (2017). *Understanding writing transfer: Implications for transformative student learning in higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Portanova, P., Rifenburg, J. M., & Roen, D. H. (Eds.). (2018). *Contemporary perspectives on cognition and writing*. WAC Clearinghouse.
- Yancey, K. B., Davis, M., Robertson, L., Taczak, K., & Workman, E. (2018). Writing across college: Key terms and multiple contexts as factors promoting students' transfer of writing knowledge and practice. *The WAC Journal*, 42.

Roles and Responsibilities of Faculty and Student, Presented as Timetable

We propose working on a modified timeline for this project, since part of Gabrielle's data collection should be completed before students leave for summer break, and Meg will be out of town at a research seminar from the end of July through the middle of August. The timeline presented below has Gabrielle working approximately 33.3 hours per week for 12 weeks, from April 29 through July 19.

Spring 2019

Meg will compile will create a reading list for Gabrielle with several texts that will need to be read prior to the research design phase, and others that can be read as appropriate throughout the process. Gabrielle will keep a research journal/annotated bibliography of scholarship she reads throughout the project.

Late March

The initial research design of the qualitative portion of the study will be collaborative and will need to take place by the end of March so that HSIRB paperwork can be submitted prior to the end of the Spring 2019 semester.

April 29-May 9

Gabrielle administers survey to current FY students regarding their conceptions of "good writing" and organizes writing samples collected from the 2018 FY Summer Writing assignments. After the last day of classes, Gabrielle sends out a reminder inviting further survey responses.

May 9-19

Gabrielle and Meg use a grounded theory approach to develop a set of codes based on students' own definitions of good writing articulated in the "Transition to College" summer writing emails. Gabrielle begins coding these writing samples.

May 20-June 2

Gabrielle analyzes student responses to the "Encountering Hiroshima" InFocus essay writing samples to determine whether individual students' self-identified characteristics of good writing are enacted in their "Encountering Hiroshima" essays.

June 3-16

Gabrielle and Meg will create a set of codes based on current FYW student learning outcomes and Gabrielle will apply those codes in her analysis of summer writing samples in order to determine whether and how incoming students are already demonstrating college writing readiness.

June 17-30

Gabrielle will analyze survey results and compare how students' expressed characteristics of good writing may have changed after one year of college. Gabrielle finishes coding any artifacts remaining from previous stages of research. Meg and Gabrielle meet to begin synthesizing findings from completed stages of research project.

July 1-10

Collaboratively draft findings report and plan opportunities to share research beyond Moravian at regional or national writing studies conferences, or in relevant publications.

July 11-19

Collaboratively finalize findings report to be shared with Writing At Moravian Advisory Committee and other stakeholders (potentially including individual FYW instructors, Writing Fellows and Writing Center Tutors, faculty who teach Writing-Intensive or Writing-Enriched courses, administrators, or others).

Discipline-appropriate Research

This proposed SOAR project will build upon research methodologies with which Gabrielle is already familiar, and over the course of the project Gabrielle and Meg will work collaboratively to develop survey instruments, engage in grounded theory coding, and utilize qualitative data analysis methods in various ways. Additionally, Gabrielle will further familiarize herself with current writing studies scholarship, especially as it relates to students' development of theories of writing, awareness of rhetorical situation, and the transfer of writing knowledge and skills.

Gabrielle is well-positioned to undertake this research, and her continued engagement with questions about students' preparation for college writing has been foundational in her development as an undergraduate writing studies scholar. Her initial curiosity about these issues began in her Fall 2017 Introduction to Writing Arts course, and a project for that class grew into a successful Summer 2018 SOAR project, "Toward Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation of the Teaching of Writing in Local High Schools." Her SOAR project, in turn, led to further research that Gabrielle has been accepted to present at the the prestigious Undergraduate Poster Session at the upcoming Conference on College Composition and Communication in March 2019.

Contributions to the Community

Gabrielle plans to use what we learn from the data to draft a report that will be distributed to FYW professors and the Writing At Moravian Advisory Committee to emphasize what skills need the most developmental support in FYW courses. This information will be valuable for Writing At Moravian as we continue to develop and refine the approach to

faculty training and support for First-Year Writing and other sites of writing across campus. Likewise, Writing Fellows and Writing Center Tutors will benefit from access to this information, which will inform the ways they work with student writers in classroom and one-on-one tutorship settings. Beyond Moravian, numerous presentation and publication opportunities exist for such research, and Meg and Gabrielle plan to disseminate research findings to the wider writing studies community.

2019 SOAR Summer Project Student Statement of Purpose

Student on project

Gabrielle Stanley

Discussion of Rationale

I have spent the last year conducting research in writing education, and in that time have developed a passion for learning what can be done to increase student success in collegiate-level writing. My participation in SOAR last summer laid the foundation for my current research, as I developed the base knowledge needed to pursue the answers to my current questions about the writing abilities students bring with them to college. As explained in my SOAR presentation last summer, I would be continuing my research to include student responses submitted on their summer assignments, and I have spent the months since analyzing those responses. By the time my next SOAR project would begin, I also will have presented my findings at the Conference on College Composition & Communication in Pittsburgh. My presentation at CCCC's focuses on the lack of engagement, flexibility, and metacognition that is made apparent as students talk about their perceptions of good writing, and how students do not seem to view writing as an action that extends beyond academic assignments in English classes. The project I am proposing is an extension of this previous work, and I am hopeful that it will provide the information I need to more specifically identify the areas in which college students struggle with writing. As it always seems to be, the more I research, the more I develop further lines of inquiry, and I would like for my research to be an ongoing process that I continue to expand upon over time. Another year with SOAR would allow me the means to continue my research, and would bring me closer to understanding and helping to develop solutions to the issue that I care about so deeply.

Expected Outcomes

By the end of the summer, I will have analyzed student responses from both before and after completion of a year of college. I will have also analyzed the InFocus writing samples that correspond with the Transition to College summer responses. With this information, I will generate a report that can be distributed to individual FYW professors and the Writing At Moravian Advisory Committee to inform them of the overall takeaways related to FYW, as well as the areas in which students struggle even after completing the course. In doing so, I hope to increase mindfulness of these weaker areas so that FYW professors can pay extra attention to them, whether that be through an altered curriculum or simply an adjusted approach to teaching their courses.