Two Undergraduate Students' Journal Reviewing Experiences

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Abstract: This paper describes the benefits of student-run publications from the perspective of two undergraduate students. Based on their experiences, the commentary elaborates how reviewing for a student journal has contributed to their growth as writers and developed a sense of community.

Introduction

Working with an undergraduate publication affords young students the opportunity to construct a plethora of new skills or, at the very least, a chance to reinforce a pre-existing skill set. Of these skills, arguably some of the most notable are transfer, metacognition, and assimilation into their university's community for first-year writing. As students from a large university in Southern Ontario, we will expand on these skills and how we contributed to and derived from our firsthand editing and reviewing experiences in an undergraduate journal for the university.

Author Backgrounds

We both participated as reviewers for the journal "Writing for University and Beyond: A Journal of First-Year Student Writing at UTM." Our role of reviewing was to read first-year essay submissions, then note areas of improvement to filter out suitable papers that could be used in the journal. This entailed identifying essays that displayed coherent writing, had an interesting topic relevant to the journal, and cited additional sources to support their claims. Having these characteristics mitigated the amount of revision required, expediting the publication process. Student reviewers were assigned to groups based on the sub-themes of the journal. For example, in "Writing for University and Beyond: A Journal of First-Year Student Writing at UTM," there are separate categories authors can apply to. Analyzing essays focused on what composes a genre is a separate theme from analyzing how discursive communities function. After reviewers

independently make their critiques, they meet with fellow reviewers of the same group to discuss their reasoning behind the essays they support. This functions as a peer review for the authors of the essays and ensures consensus in the reviewers' perspectives.

Discussion

Transferring Skills

As undergraduate students, there is an unavoidable expectation to learn from a breadth of different subjects. This interdisciplinary approach can be taxing on fledgling writers, as each branch of study has different writing requirements. This is where transfer comes into play. Transfer refers to the ability to repurpose a proficient skill and apply it to a new framework (Driscoll & Devette, 2020). Transfer theory proposes the relevance of providing direct indications that stimulate learners to recognize the parallel between the origin and target of transfer; in this circumstance, between writing as a journal editor/reviewer and personal writing habits (Brent, 2011). In Nuha's experience in working with the journal, they had the chance to explore transferring some of the skills they obtained in a preliminary writing course to their editing/reviewing framework while also acquiring a new set of skills adaptable to disciplines and discourses related to but separate from the journal. As an English major, Nuha has been exposed to a wide range of writing disciplines where expectations do not always coincide. Of these skills, Nuha points out writing heuristics, specifically 'They say/I say' structures introduced by Birkenstein and Graff (2006), which they picked up over the course of their major, as a considerable contributor to the improvement of their writing. This heuristic allowed Nuha to secure a metacognitive structure of thinking and writing, to analyze and reanalyze their thought and writing processes. On numerous occasions, Nuha would write an essay or a story only to notice in retrospect that it sounded like a checklist of facts or thoughts; nothing truly seemed to come together or read cohesively. Writing heuristics have added a very necessary element of direction to Nuha's writing to make it cohesive and relevant. This skill has also proven to be an asset in the reviewing process of the journal. When analyzing papers in preparation to publish, it became second nature for the reviewer to employ the kind of mindset that writers had. As an outside reader, heuristics acted as a benchmark of linked ideas to create and follow a cohesive chain of thoughts. Being an undergraduate reviewer has influenced the way Nuha interacts with students and scholarly writing, to understand and connect with it at a deeper level.

Learning by Metacognition

Reviewing for the journal also allowed us to refine our metacognitive skills, essentially the capacity to remove all personal aspects of analysis and to observe oneself as a writer, which is a skill that is both transferrable and a catalyst to transfer (Rudd, 2019). Metacognition further refers to thinking about thinking, which improves a writer's ability to observe their stream of thought and understanding to decide its adequacy in regard to their writing (Gorzelsky, 2016). These skills both contribute tremendously to further education as we add to the 'toolbox' of skills for students to utilize throughout our academic careers. In Susan's opinion, like them, many students are writing for the sake of meeting class deadlines. They come into writing with unconscious biases; in this case, they are formulating sentences with only meeting rubrics in mind. To only write answers is a restrictive style of writing that cannot show an intuitive relationship to the overall message. This is because the arguments are not connected, thus hindering the flow of ideas and inhibiting the intended audience's understanding. The disorganization of ideas is not immediately clear to oneself, even with introspection. Therefore, it

is necessary to expand beyond one perspective. Susan's perspective as a reviewer allowed for a unique environment to foster meta-cognition. While reading academic papers can improve writing and expand perspectives of different writing styles, Susan was a thoughtless consumer of information before working with the journal. When Susan read textbooks, they were not challenged to think about what features make for good writing and what makes for bad. The role of reviewing was neither authoring nor passive reading, as it required critical thinking skills to identify awkward phrasing, irrelevant information, and organization to provide the writer with constructive feedback. In turn, the feedback acquired by meta-analysis became transferred to Susan's own writing for improvement by taking on a third-party perspective that can apply to their own writing style.

Integration to Community

Forcing students into an active role is how publications promote student integration into the academic writing community. In this paper, the academic writing community refers to the form of writing targeted at an audience producing/reviewing research and exchanging knowledge on a formal area of study. Because student reviewers are now part of the publication process, there is an incentive to behave in accordance with academic writing standards in a discourse community. Why is becoming part of a discourse community considered desirable? The academic writing community offers a platform to apply the skills developed through reviewing outside of coursework. Besides further refining linguistic usage, this is an opportunity to gain experience for careers related to publication. Writing learned from publication takes form in many different careers, such as journalism, book authorship, editing, marketing, and research publication.

To join the academic writing community, the guidelines follow the discursive community rules laid out by Swales (2016), who is known for establishing the fundamental components of discourse communities. Swales systematically examined different communities to establish behavioral patterns. His findings describe a discursive community as an exclusive circle of people actively interacting and working towards a common goal. There are rules to abide by for a community to function. Condensing these rules, all members are expected to interact with one another and work towards a common goal. This rule makes the assumption that all members are proficient enough in the community's customs and knowledge (Swales, 2016). For the academic writing community, this proficiency is based on producing content that meets a standardized level of skill in written communication. The act of reviewing satisfies this condition by developing improved authorship, as mentioned through the transfer of writing and meta-cognitive thinking practiced as a reviewer.

Of the principles of discursive communities that Swales established, an essential rule that applies to undergraduate students exploring scholarly discourses is that members of a community must have a method of interaction to exchange ideas or work together for a common goal. In Susan's experience, this platform is the undergraduate journal. Being a part of the academic writing discourse community acts as a bridge to bring writing peers, fellow reviewers, and mentors together. We, Susan and Nuha are given the opportunity to communicate with similarly goal-oriented people who give feedback and offer our experiences. This vicarious learning, similar to meta-cognition through reviewing, fosters growth in writing through an alternative way to expand perspectives. This highlights that undergraduate students with the opportunity of publication would be introduced to authority figures within the writing community discourse: mentors. Mentors of the journal are professors and experienced students who exemplify

authoritative members due to their longer involvement in teaching and producing work studying the core values of writing. The role of mentors is to provide feedback on developing opinions formed as reviewers from a more experienced standpoint. This merger with students of a new generation of discursive engagement, in tandem with the wisdom of writing veterans, enriches the ideas of undergraduate students and reduces shortcomings due to writing inexperience.

In Nuha's experience of these interactions, students learn how to exist as a scholar within these discourses directly from faculty, either implicitly through action or explicitly through candid instruction. This type of mentorship is indispensable within working for a journal context as undergraduate students are often in need of someone to provide context to the discourse to set expectations and follow by example. Being aware of these unspoken rules to maintain community status can be valuable to undergraduate students looking to further their education in academia, as they are required to know how to work within communities of scholars and faculty members, not just as students but within the framework of a scholar themselves. This is where the interplay of journal work compliments any other work done within similar fields.

Limitations

It is important to note limitations to which the benefits apply. Academic writing is a niche field. In Susan's experience, work in some disciplines, such as excavation in archaeology or solving mathematical equations, have little opportunity to use writing skills from an undergraduate journal. Therefore, learning through delivering peer review may not benefit students in more practical disciplines. The experience of assimilating to an academic writing community specifically is not an all-encompassing genre and would reach peak application when supplemented by the individual's background in conjunction with other discursive communities.

Conflictingly, another limitation experienced by many undergraduate students in similar discourses is the limitations of such an expansive framework. In Nuha's experience in the field of English, where writing expectations encompass a plethora of variations, be that voice, style, tone, etc., it was often difficult for them and students alike to get a grasp of and become proficient enough to enter appropriate discourses. Though these academic writing journals can be niche, they still receive a substantial amount of attention from students at varying levels of proficiency; it is often difficult for writers to stand out in all this traction despite their efforts.

Conclusion

To conclude, reviewing undergraduate publications is a resource that anyone within the broader academic community can use to grow as writers through peer reviewing other works. For example, we developed communication skills transferable across disciplines, acquired new approaches to writing using reviewer perspectives, and gained connections to a writing community that allows constructive exchanges and acknowledgment. These acquired skills and connections are invaluable and will aid our journey through post-secondary education and perhaps across possible careers of interest.

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