

Education Professors' Perceptions: A Response

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I have three problems with Gambell's paper. They concern its uncertainty of purpose, its flawed method of gathering data, and its absence of sustained analysis.

First, it is not clear whether Gambell means to focus on the writing problems of students or on the nature of instructors' perceptions of these problems. To make this distinction is not to split hairs, as I shall show.

In the first paragraph we are led to believe that the paper is going to deal with the writing problems of students. Though the question is ambiguous, when Gambell asks, "What is the problem, and just how extensive is it?" I understand him to be asking about the problems of student writing. In the second paragraph, he says that he has developed a questionnaire "to determine the specifics of perceived student writing problems." This, it seems to me, is a flawed procedure for studying the nature of the problems of student writing. It removes both the researcher and the reader from the problems being studied, prevents both from seeing the context and the exact nature of the problems identified, and denies them the opportunity to observe any patterns in the problems discovered. The use of the questionnaire creates special difficulties, for he admits that the professors in his study are vague in their description of students' writing problems and, because of their lack of knowledge of a process approach to writing, he was obliged to construct a questionnaire that was conservative and unsophisticated, one that emphasized errors, error types and error analysis, and a traditional grammar approach to language study. He also, by his own admission, constructed a questionnaire whose length discouraged some professors from responding. It was only after several written reminders and knocking on doors that he collected responses from 52% of the full-time teaching faculty. One wonders, then, why Gambell chose this approach. That is, why did he compromise his questionnaire by asking instructors about student writing problems, instructors who found it difficult to be specific about students' writing, lacked knowledge of the writing process, and were even confused about such terms as *usage*, and

syntax? Again, one cannot help asking, if his purpose is to examine writing problems, why he did not himself examine samples of students' writing, analyzing and exemplifying them in his paper. In doing this he would have brought the reader closer to the writing of students, to the actual problems of their writing. One thinks of Pringle and Freedman's study (1985), and especially of Shaughnessy's (1977), with its close analysis of the writing of college students, as possibilities here.

One misses in Gambell's study the copious use of examples, the careful analysis of writing problems, and the comprehensive discussion of possible causes of these problems which Shaughnessy provides. For example, she explains in detail the students' problems with possessives. Two brief examples will illustrate her keen perception and the clarity of her analysis. She explains that students may omit the 's in such expressions as "in today world" and "these people beliefs" because there is no possessive form in their dialect (she mentions "Mary house" as an example from Black English vernacular) or, she says further, students may ignore the 's "in favor of juxtaposition, a pattern which could be seen as analogous to noun compounds such as 'school bus', 'child welfare', 'student activities'" (p. 108). These are all insightful observations, with a firm grounding in linguistics, and easily grasped because of their particularity. Gambell, on the other hand, in his discussion of possessives is rather tentative and general. He writes: "it seemed to me that problems with the use of the possessive probably arise when students overcompensate when uncertain what usage applies." I find such a statement too general to be helpful.

Perhaps another example or two will help to make my point. In his discussion of problems in conceptualization, Gambell explains that paucity of ideas was ranked as "the third most commonly perceived problem of conceptualization." His explanation of this is "Paucity of ideas might be related to an inability to select appropriate ideas ... or to a lack of ideas." It is difficult to know what to make of this statement, even if one ignores the tautology that "Paucity of ideas may be related ... to a lack of ideas." It is certainly an inadequate explanation. Perhaps the subjects given to students were too complex and abstract to allow for the generation of ideas. Perhaps wide reading, discussions, and careful observations – the repositories of ideas – were missing. Perhaps students view writing as merely writing down what they know and have not been taught that it may, itself, be an act of creating ideas through synthesizing, generalizing, and comparing. We do not know; we do not have enough information on which to base a judgement. Neither does Gambell know because it is difficult to speculate about the causes of students' problems if they are merely reported (checked and ranked) on a questionnaire. The problems need to be seen in the context of students' writing. For example, Gambell, in his discussion of spelling, concludes that many spelling problems "could be

eliminated if students proofread their work." I am sure this is true, but surely we expect more than a cliché from a study of students' writing problems. To be fair to Gambell, nothing more specific can be said here because, from the results of his questionnaire, he knows only that, among mechanical problems, spelling was perceived as the most common problem. We cannot know from this the specific nature of the problems and, therefore, cannot diagnose their causes. Were these spelling problems, one wonders, caused by the unpredictabilities within English spelling, by unfamiliarity with the structure of words, by poor pronunciation, or by dialectal influence?¹ These are important questions, but they cannot be answered in a study of this kind.

Let us suppose that Gambell's purpose was not to focus on students' writing problems but on the specific nature of instructors' perceptions of students' writing problems and on the relationship between these perceptions and "the course requirements they [professors] demanded of students and their attitudes toward writing." Has he been more successful in achieving this purpose? I think not. First, there is no description of the relationship between instructors' perceptions of students' problems and their course requirements or their attitudes toward writing. There is a brief description of the kinds of assignments given students, a general discussion of positive aspects of students' writing (attitudes?), and a reporting of what professors perceive to be students' problems. But there is no attempt to establish any relationship between any of these. For example, there is no discussion of the relationship between a professor's perceptions of students' problems and the nature of the assignments he gives.

Second, in using the questionnaire method, Gambell has, I think, taken the wrong approach to the study of professors' perceptions of student writing problems. What can we expect from respondents who are asked to rank (from memory), say, ten specific kinds of syntactic problems noticed in students' writing? At the least, the rankings are suspect. I think most instructors would find it difficult, if not impossible, to be as precise as the questionnaire asks them to be. As well, choosing and ranking items devised by another does not give a true picture of the professors' actual perceptions of students' writing problems. The responses are, as it were, twice removed. They are responses to someone else's responses. I think something different, calling for direct and specific responses, is necessary. Schwartz (1984) conducted a study in which she asked students and professors to state their preferences for one passage in each of three paired sets of passages. Each passage differed from the other in the set on the basis of style only. In her discussion, she included examples of the professors' responses, thus allowing the reader to observe the specific nature of the respondents' perceptions and to understand the specific

nature of the differences between the perceptions of professors and students. Based on her analysis, she concludes that there

seems to be little match between what faculty want in writing and what students think we want. Whereas our rhetorical values as readers shift with the writing context – depending on perceptions of audience, purpose, style, and content – our students' rhetorical values as writers seem to stay the same: – Use big words to be impressive. – Write more to be intelligent. – Be impersonal to be logical. – Use correct punctuation to be mature (p. 6).

Gambell is obliged to be much more general in his conclusion – obliged to be more general because there are no responses from students in his paper to show what their perceptions of good writing are. There is, therefore, no evidence in his paper to support his conclusion that there is a poor match between what the instructors of writing want and what students think they want.

I have tried to show in this critique that Gambell has not helped us substantially to understand the problems students have in writing nor the nature of professors' perceptions of these problems and that this is due mainly to his approach to the study of these issues. To understand the specific nature of students' writing problems, I have maintained, we need to see them in their particularity in context, and we need detailed analysis and interpretation of them. Similarly, I have argued that one's perceptions of writing problems cannot be measured – cannot, that is, be adequately identified by quantifying responses on a questionnaire – and that to understand truly another's responses to writing we need to know the linguistic context to which that person makes the responses, and, further, examples of the responses made meaningful by careful description, analysis, and interpretation.

NOTE

¹ See Shaughnessy (1977) pp. 164–175 for suggested causes of spelling problems.

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