

Perceptions of Student Writing: A Comment on Trevor Gambell

W. John Harker
university of victoria

Is illiteracy rampant among education students at the University of Saskatchewan? This is the question addressed by Gambell, and it is one that needs to be addressed at other institutions as well. As we all know, it is common for faculty lounges to be enlivened by loudly rendered reports of less than elegant student writing. But the question is: to what degree do education students actually demonstrate an inability to express themselves in writing?

The conclusions Gambell reaches are mixed. While student writing reveals weaknesses, he tells us that these weaknesses are not generally of sufficient magnitude to warrant panic among the professorate. This generality, however, masks a more serious problem which Gambell also identifies. He finds that the most common type of writing assignment given students is one in which they are expected to analyze an issue through the argumentative mode of discourse, writing where they are expected to display criticality, logic, and, more importantly, independence in their thinking. Surely this is the most important form of written expression for prospective teachers preparing for the responsibility of furthering informed and intelligent independence of thought and expression among their own pupils. And yet it is here that their weaknesses in writing become most apparent.

The reason for students' difficulty with argumentative writing, Gambell suggests, lies in their sense of authority, the omnipresence of the course instructor as the final arbiter of value irrespective of what they may themselves think. The purpose for which they write is professorial approbation, and they perceive this approbation to depend upon repeating views held and expressed by their professors. Students seem to believe that what the professor has said is correct since he or she said it, and it follows that this is what he or she wants to hear parroted back. However, professors find this repetition unsatisfactory since not only does it betray students' inability to formulate their own opinions but it seems that in repeating what they think their professors want to hear students' writing

becomes illogical, their ideas do not follow coherently, and weak argumentation results. In other words, students often do not seem able to “get it right,” even when “it” is what they are told in their classes.

Gambell's solution to this problem is to encourage students to read more and to reflect more on their reading in order to gain greater independence in their argumentative writing. But can the solution be as simple as this? It would seem that the real problem lies in students' sense of audience – something only briefly mentioned in Gambell's paper. In the first place, since students' professors are almost always their sole audience, is it any surprise that they write exclusively for them? And simply adding the authority of the written text to the already existing pervasive authority of the professor would seem to hold little promise for making student writing more logical and coherent. In itself, this practice invites further confusion as students feel caught among competing points of view and become increasingly unsure of the place of their own opinions within the matrix of differing viewpoints confronting them. The result to be expected is a further erosion of confidence with the inevitable consequence that students will fall back on the safe course of repeating in an increasingly muddled manner the professorial *obiter dicta* they hear in their classes.

Is this to argue against encouraging independent reading as a means of furthering students' thought about issues in education and their ability to write about these issues? Of course not. Rather, what it is to argue against is maintaining the professor as the sole audience for student writing. Is it not acceptable to provide in our courses more interaction among students by encouraging them to exchange and discuss their written work among themselves in an effort to expand their audience and thereby to demonstrate that they are writing for more than a single, draconian, red-pencil-wielding professor? And could not this practice be extended across universities as instructors in a course – for example, in the history of education – arrange for papers written by their students to be shared with students taking a similar course at another institution. (At the very least, we professors might learn more about what our colleagues in other institutions are doing in this way.) Why cannot our university classes be conceived more as fora for students themselves to write about and discuss educational issues and practices – along with the course instructor whose final responsibility remains to guide students toward more independent yet informed conceptualizations of these issues? Why is it that our classes cannot be more like our professorial conferences where the very best results derive from spirited debate among competing points of view rather than blindly following some arbitrary authority?

The point of all of this is that as professors in our classrooms we are

modelers of discourse and discourse usage. Our knowledge of the writing process may not always be explicit, as Gambell maintains, but as writers ourselves it is implicit. We know the process since our professional responsibilities require participation in this process. We are knowledgeable about the revision and recursiveness of writing as ideas are manipulated, shaped, considered, and finally forged. But, because we often unconsciously assume the role of final authority in the classroom, our students inevitably become inhibited when it comes to expressing their own ideas when they perceive us as their only audience. Measures to break down this perception *within the actual process of instruction* seem to hold the most promise for remedying the problems in argumentative writing which Gambell's survey reveals. How this can be done will vary with the individual instructor and the circumstances and content of the particular course involved. And it may also result in an abdication of some of our authority as we deliberately introduce ideas which compete with our own in order to encourage students to perceive their peers as well as ourselves as the audience for whom they write. But such a loss can only result in a greater gain if, as we so often espouse, our objective is to graduate professional teachers from our colleges and faculties of education.

W. John Harker is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, P. O. Box 1700, Victoria, B.C. V8W 2Y2.