

Undergraduate Research on Writing: Benefits to Faculty and Curriculum Development

In writing studies (or rhetoric and composition), an interdisciplinary blend of humanities and social science, we study how writing works, how writers write, and how writing should be taught. Writing, once relegated in the university to basic-skills courses, has developed over the past several decades into writing studies, a robust interdisciplinary that fuels centers of study, graduate programs, and undergraduate majors. As part of this growth, undergraduate writing courses—from first-year to advanced composition, professional writing to rhetorical theory—are increasingly recognized as sites for launching undergraduate research on the nature of writing and writers' processes and practices.

Writing particularly lends itself to undergraduate research of all levels because of its ubiquity: It is both taken for granted, so that most aspects of it are under-researched, and is an activity that most students have sufficient experience with to be able to quickly pose research questions of interest to both themselves and the field. The potential of such study is exemplified in venues such as *Young Scholars in Writing*, a national, peer-reviewed undergraduate journal that is nearing a decade of publishing undergraduate research on writing and rhetoric.

What we see in writing studies, then, is a particularly rich intersection of research questions and student researchers. The former include both field-based questions (for example, how are writing habits changing with the advent of micro-blogging and social networking?) and institution-based questions (for example, what should students at X institution be learning in first-year composition in order to prepare them for upper-division writing in Y major?). Because research questions in this field can have such immediate impact on particular institutions' curricular and faculty development, undergraduate research is unusually well positioned to shape college faculty members' experiences. This article recounts two particular undergraduate research ventures at Montana State University (Bozeman)—the research experience of co-author ZuZu Feder, an undergraduate, and an ongoing project by students in co-author Doug Downs' first-year composition courses—that exemplify how writing studies lends itself to undergraduate research that powerfully impacts faculty development.

Undergraduates Researching What First-Year Composition Needs to Teach

First-year composition remains one of the very few general-education courses that most students take on most college campuses. Its near-universality combines with the need for very small class sizes (usually 25 students or fewer) to require massive numbers of sections, often equivalent to or larger than the number of college algebra sections a campus offers. At large universities, it's common to have more than 100 graduate teaching assistants (who in writing courses are actually instructors of record), adjunct instructors, and tenure-line faculty teaching "College Writing" I and II. The resulting writing programs present their administrators with significant curricular and faculty-development challenges: A huge number of often-marginalized instructors must be kept apprized not only of cutting-edge research on writing—particularly in new digital modalities—but also of student needs in the context of the courses' roles in preparing students for college writing in their particular institution. Two major questions writing programs need research on, then, are where are students as writers when they enter college, and where are students going as writers after their writing course(s)? The studies we profile here show how these questions can be addressed by undergraduate research.

To address where incoming students are as writers, Feder's research project, for which she received an MSU Undergraduate Scholars Program (USP) grant, surveyed 150 first year students in light of research on writing instruction and conceptual metaphor and metaphorical language. Her project began from an exercise Downs had students do in a junior-level "Teaching Rhetoric, Composition, and Speech" course, asking them to complete the sentence "Writing is..." with a metaphor best describing how they thought about writing. Responses included "Writing is like hiking," "Writing is a sandwich," and "Writing is a journey," representing ways that different students see and think about writing. Feder was peer tutoring in a University Studies freshman seminar at the time and wondered what asking this same question of MSU's incoming freshmen could tell us about how they think about writing, and about how writing has been, and should be, taught.



MSU students Sarah Sharp (left), Lea Larson, and KJ Gibbs debate methods of data collection for their project mapping writing across the university.

Writing studies lacks research regarding students' basic conceptions of writing. We know a lot about factors that influence how students write or feel about writing (see, Perl 1979; Sommers 1980; Palmquist and Young 1992), but not much has been said about how students think about writing in general. Feder's research attempted to explore this terrain further through the lens of conceptual metaphors in students' language about writing. Research by Schön (1979), Lakoff & Johnson (1980), and Eubanks (1999) asserts that metaphorical language is a powerful linguistic tool that allows us to make sense of the world by understanding things in terms of other things. Tomlinson (1986, 1988) applied this frame to writing, looking at metaphors used by professional writers to talk about their craft. Feder saw that asking students to talk about writing via metaphorical language gives them the tool to relate their conceptions of writing to other experiences in their lives, providing direct insight into how they think about writing.

One implication of better understanding new students' conceptions of writing would be a clearer sense of how first-year writing courses might meet and shape those conceptions. By studying a significant sample of first-year students (about three percent of the freshman class), Feder was able to generate data of great meaning to the field. At the same time, because her research examined the specific population of students that the university's writing program serves, her research has immediate institutional implications: Faculty (including Downs) designing curricula and instructor-development for writing courses can draw directly on her findings. For example, one of her central

findings (in preliminary analysis, as her survey developed mountains of data to be cross-tabulated and interpreted) is a striking difference between how students who like writing see it, as opposed to students who do not like writing. Students who do like it are more likely to see writing as a verb, as an ongoing act or a tool for accomplishing something, while students who do not like it tend to see it more as a thing or experience, usually negative. The difference is so stark that MSU's writing program can use Feder's findings to reconsider first-year composition in light of students' varied expectations of writing.

Undergraduate research can also address the question of where students will go as college writers upon completing their writing courses. While mentoring Feder on her research project, Downs also facilitated a research project with about 50 freshmen and sophomores in his College Writing II courses in the fall 2009 and spring 2010 semesters. The project has been to "map" writing assignments and instruction in various majors, fields, and departments across MSU. Instead of relying purely on various departments' self-reporting, these undergraduate researchers are interviewing students; collecting catalogue descriptions, course syllabi, and assignment sheets; and meeting with faculty to get descriptions of the writing assignments and instruction students actually encounter in their various courses, program by program. The benefits of this work to MSU's writing program are direct, as students are building baseline data that would otherwise have to be collected over much longer time by Downs alone. Essentially, this is an example of crowd-sourcing research, using multiple student accounts across several semesters to build the broadest possible database and correct for any individual lack of diligence, misinterpretation, or error. We can take, for example, the average of five different accounts of what writing assignments and instruction look like in bio-engineering. (This pedagogy and its advantages are described fully in Downs & Wardle [2007], and its implications for undergraduate research are considered in Downs & Wardle's [2009] chapter in Grobman & Kinkead's *Undergraduate Research in English Studies*.)

Undergraduate Research Teaches Students How Institutions Work

Undergraduate research projects like Feder's are a chance for students to learn how colleges work and how to become participants in their institutions on a level that other undergraduate work does not. Her project involved all the work of profes-

sional research that students must learn in order to be effective participants in an institution, especially if they choose to go to graduate school or in other ways remain a part of the academic community. In the process of carrying out this research, Feder applied for IRB approval for research on human subjects, an essential part of most research in writing studies. In seeking funding for her project, Feder participated in another frequent institutional aspect of research as she wrote a successful proposal for an Undergraduate Scholars Program grant.

Based on these experiences, Feder has seen firsthand how the process of successfully carrying out research within an institution requires organization and interaction with dozens of people around the university. Her project required meeting with the directors of the freshman seminar in the College of Letters and Science to ask permission to survey students in the seminars. As a condition for being allowed to do so, the directors asked Feder to add a demographic question to her survey, asking students if they were first-generation college students, and to analyze any related trends in the survey results. In addition, the process of surveying students itself involved coordination with more than a dozen instructors, and took several weeks in order to fit into instructors' schedules the 10 to 15 minutes required to attain students' informed consent and administer the survey.

The project undertaken by Downs' classes similarly has made many of his students more "fluent" participants in their college environment—most notably, they've had to talk with department administrators and administrative assistants, with faculty members, and with professionals in the community. They also have had to think about what *written* records colleges keep of their curricula and how to access those. It stands to reason these students have developed a familiarity and comfort that few others have with navigating the administrative structures of their institutions, knowledge that will likely accompany them to other institutions in the future.

Undergraduate Research's Benefits for Faculty Members

Downs' experience in these research projects, particularly mentoring Feder, affirms many apparent and long-discussed benefits that faculty mentors gain from undergraduate research. There is something to the notion of improved morale, keeping faculty active and happy and engaged by very directly bridging their research and teaching. While the prophecy may be some-

what self-fulfilling—it stands to reason that faculty who are committed to undergraduate research to begin with will find fulfillment in the interaction with students that the research creates—it's nonetheless important to note that in the cases here, the effect is real.

While the highly individualized (if not downright idiosyncratic) research agendas that characterize humanities research (MacDonald 1987, 1994) continue to make collaboration with undergraduates a challenge, our experiences align with those recounted by Fritzman & Gibson (2008) and Schantz (2008) in that undergraduates' research extends and feeds the professor's interests. Feder's research, in particular, explores questions that have long fascinated Downs but that he lacked time to research. And the first-year writing students' experiences are nearly a direct analog to the laboratory experiences of many science students, where a faculty member directs the collaboration of a large number of undergraduates toward study of the faculty member's research question. These experiences demonstrate both extremes of the gamut of research models explored by Laurie Grobman (2007), with Feder's project representing the traditional humanities model of "independent research" and the writing students' project representing "student-faculty collaborative research in the humanities, offering new kinds of research and pedagogical opportunities for faculty and students" (p. 23). Both, it appears, work.

It also seems important to recognize that facilitating undergraduate research—particularly, we would argue, in the humanities with their model of knowledge-creation stemming from independent, deeply read research—is a learned activity every bit as much as any other aspect of teaching. There is little natural or inevitable about it, little intuitive to the traditional faculty experience, and it requires learning through experience by trial and error. The undergraduate research experiences we've described benefit Downs and other faculty members he can share the experiences with by helping Downs learn how to sustain and facilitate *other* undergraduate research.

Working with undergraduate researchers also helps faculty remember what they've forgotten they had to learn at some point. Having to explain things faculty members have long taken for granted exposes and opens to question the paths of thought that have become routine for them. It's a way of questioning faculty knowledge and seeing gaps in it.

Informing Teaching, Research, and Faculty Development

Whenever undergraduate researchers truly join ongoing professional conversations and produce findings of note, their research informs their fields and contributes to development of faculty as teachers, as in the cases we examine here. Feder's findings lend themselves to dissemination in key forums in writing studies, including professional meetings and journals. And while the institution-specific nature of the first-year students' research doesn't create a need to publish, the students' findings still become part of ongoing national conversations about the actual and desired shapes of writing instruction in U.S. higher education.

What we wish to emphasize most, though, is the potential of the research featured here for *local* impact on teaching and faculty development. Because writing studies is a field so closely related to teaching, much, if not most, of its research has clear ramifications for teaching. One of Feder's main research questions has been understanding how students conceptualize writing in order to better shape curriculum, a process that will begin as she feeds her data and results to MSU's writing program. One example of how Feder's findings already are shaping the program is in an ongoing discussion of student-learning outcomes for writing courses. Thanks to her research, we now know that our writing courses may need a specific goal of shaping students' understandings of writing as a tool to accomplish specific purposes and tasks.

Along with using such knowledge in curriculum and outcomes development, Feder's findings will prove helpful in faculty development as we show her data to instructors in the writing program. We would, for example, want to draw instructors' attention to students' language about writing and the underlying misconceptions it might reveal. In such ways, undergraduate research is having exactly the same effect as faculty research would in shaping curriculum and faculty development, but it is research that due to faculty time constraints wouldn't happen without undergraduate researchers. The same is true of the first-year undergraduate researchers' work, which studies the intersection of students' learning needs and institutional context, with direct implications for curriculum and faculty development (both in the writing program and across the curriculum) and, more broadly, institutional research. As we learn more about what kinds of writing are required elsewhere in the university, faculty in the writing program can evaluate

our curriculum and instructor-development more effectively. Students' data collection is not yet complete, and collation and analysis of the dataset will take some time, but without doubt their work will reshape writing instruction on the MSU campus.

In such ways, it becomes clear that undergraduate researchers can contribute not only to a field's (disciplinary) knowledge, but also to the development of faculty and curricula at their own institutions. While these researchers worked in a field that particularly lends itself to these applications of research findings, we think it important to encourage all undergraduate researchers and mentors to look for the local, institutional potential, especially in faculty development, embodied in students' research.

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ZuZu Feder graduated from Montana State University (Bozeman) in May with a B.A. in English and has entered a master's program in English at MSU, focusing on rhetoric and composition/writing studies. She is interested in college-level writing instruction and has worked as a student writing tutor for several years, as well as a teaching assistant in Anthropology 101 and a freshman seminar course. She is teaching Writing 101 as a graduate teaching assistant.