

Developing Writing Identity in an Advanced Agricultural Communications Media Writing Course

Holli R. Leggette

Holly Jarvis

David Walther

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/jac>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).

Recommended Citation

Leggette, Holli R.; Jarvis, Holly; and Walther, David (2016) "Developing Writing Identity in an Advanced Agricultural Communications Media Writing Course," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 99: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1041>

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Applied Communications* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Developing Writing Identity in an Advanced Agricultural Communications Media Writing Course

Abstract

Writing is a complex process students use to interpret assumptions, make meaning, solidify intentions, and convey knowledge. The purpose of this study was to use Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity to understand students' perspectives on how their experience in an advanced agricultural communications media writing course helped them develop their identity as writers. At the end of the course, 57 students completed one-page reflections that were analyzed using content analytic induction (Patton, 2002) guided by Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of college student development. Students showed evidence of experiencing growth in each vector and became media writers who could identify themselves as writers even if they did not intend to pursue a writing career. Student-faculty relationships were key factors in writing identity development because students valued the instructor feedback and human connection. The second major assignment was the point at which they either identified themselves as writers or they did not. Perhaps this was because students were immersed in a structured writing process during that time. Students indicated the value is not in the word but in the author's ability to connect words into a cohesive structure that captures an audience. Based on this study, agricultural communications instructors should focus on teaching students the pathway to the end product and not focus on teaching the end product. More research, therefore, needs to be conducted on what components of the second major writing assignment helped students become more effective writers and helped them develop identity as writers.

Keywords

Advanced media writing, writing-intensive course, education and identity

Developing Writing Identity in an Advanced Agricultural Communications Media Writing Course

Holli R. Leggette, Holly Jarvis and David Walther

Abstract

Writing is a complex process students use to interpret assumptions, make meaning, solidify intentions, and convey knowledge. The purpose of this study was to use Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity to understand students' perspectives on how their experience in an advanced agricultural communications media writing course helped them develop their identity as writers. At the end of the course, 57 students completed one-page reflections that were analyzed using content analytic induction (Patton, 2002) guided by Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of college student development. Students showed evidence of experiencing growth in each vector and became media writers who could identify themselves as writers even if they did not intend to pursue a writing career. Student-faculty relationships were key factors in writing identity development because students valued the instructor feedback and human connection. The second major assignment was the point at which they either identified themselves as writers or they did not. Perhaps this was because students were immersed in a structured writing process during that time. Students indicated the value is not in the word but in the author's ability to connect words into a cohesive structure that captures an audience. Based on this study, agricultural communications instructors should focus on teaching students the pathway to the end product and not focus on teaching the end product. More research, therefore, needs to be conducted on what components of the second major writing assignment helped students become more effective writers and helped them develop identity as writers.

Key Words

Advanced media writing, writing-intensive course, education and identity

Introduction

Is writing more than communication? It is a complex process that encompasses intricacies, functions, and possibilities (Gries, 2011). Writing as storytelling confirms identity, heartens others, and creates community (Tappenden, 2010). "The metacognitive nature of creative writing has freed the minds of learners and unleashed them to play again with their thoughts and construct them into their use of language as an art and form of communication" (Tappenden, 2010, p. 268). An understanding of discourse community contributes to students' ability to develop a sense of connection with their writing, allowing them to see writing as meaningful and worthwhile (Lunsford, Fishman, & Liew, 2013). "If it is language that defines and bounds us, then perhaps the most radical form of agency we can grant students is the ability to manipulate the very language and discourses that define them" (George, p. 340, 2012).

In the model to augment critical thinking and create knowledge through writing in the social sciences of agriculture, Leggette (2013) claimed the discourse community should be part of the larger social context. Beaufort (1999) described the discourse community as the community that guides the "network of communicative channels, oral and written, whose interplay affects the purposes

and meanings of the written texts produced within the community” (Beaufort, 1999, pp. 18–19). Leggette (2013) argued the discourse community nurtures three writing elements: content or subject matter knowledge, cognitive processes, and confidence. Therefore, for students to build a strong discourse community, they should have subject matter knowledge, the capacity to develop cognitive processes, and confidence in their writing ability (Leggette, 2013).

When students arrive at college, they are growing as writers and facing new struggles in an unfamiliar academic environment (Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, & Crawford, 2011), or new social context and discourse community. College is an important time in students’ personal transformation and growth (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), which has the potential to influence the students as writers (Brockman et al., 2011). During college, students encounter experiences that challenge their identities, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions, and they are forced to solidify those experiences in the presence of environmental influences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Faculty members should empower “students to become aware of and proficient in the performance of those identities and roles that will now be expected of them within academia” (George, 2012, p. 321).

Students become effective writers through “deepening engagement and commitments, in lively association with other students and teachers, in fields of study they want to write about” (Gottschalk & Hjortshoj, 2004. p. v), essentially within their discourse community (Beaufort, 1999; Leggette, 2013). Effective writers use writing to learn, understand, and retain information (Foster, 1983; Strachan, 2008). Curriculum is important in students’ ability to become effective writers. “Effective curriculums are achieved when a balance is found between student interest, faculty vision, and industry need” (Watson & Robertson, 2011, p. 16). Therefore, curriculum should be designed to foster students’ development, help them develop identity, enhance their learning process and cognitive skills, and challenge their thoughts and beliefs (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicated college student development is best described as vectors, meaning to impart direction and magnitude (Foubert, Nixon, Sisson, & Barnes, 2005). Developing competence, the first of Chickering and Reisser’s seven vectors, has three components: (a) intellectual competence (use of mental skills to comprehend, solve problems, reflect, analyze, synthesize, interpret, and engage in active learning); (b) physical and manual skills (use of body to increase performance, self-expression, and creativity); and (c) interpersonal competence (ability to listen, ask questions, provide feedback, and engage in meaningful conversations).

Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) second vector is managing emotions — “anxiety, anger, depression, desire, guilt and shame have the power to derail the educational process when they become excessive or overwhelming” (p. 46). In college, students learn how to release vexations and cope with opportunities and challenges before exploding. The balance of self-control and self-expression guided by awareness and integration are important components of students’ ability to manage emotions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The third vector describes students’ movement through autonomy toward interdependence — mutually reliant relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As students become interdependent, they learn to be self-sufficient, gain a sense of self-direction, and accept the responsibility of setting and reaching their goals. During the process, students become less reliant on constant feedback and more reliant on their ability to think critically and independently (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Vector four involves developing mature interpersonal relationships, including “tolerance and appreciation of differences [and] capacity for intimacy” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 48). Students

learn to establish strong relationships and make enduring commitments with honesty, responsiveness, and respect as the foundation (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Development includes learning how to share, accept differences, appreciate the good and bad, and build relationships that endure crises, distance, and separation (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Establishing identity, the fifth vector, depends partially on the first four vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). “Development of identity includes ... clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style, sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Established identity is a precursor to students’ feeling of competence and worthwhileness. However, students’ establishment of their overall identity is dependent on their ability to establish physical, sexual, personal, social, historical, cultural, and spiritual identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

In the sixth vector, developing purpose, students increase their ability to assess their interests and options, illuminate their goals, make plans, and find opportunities despite challenges (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Developing purpose requires students to develop action plans and work toward work-life balance. It “involves a growing ability to unify one’s many different goals within the scope of a larger, more meaningful purpose, and to exercise intentionally on a daily basis” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 50).

Developing integrity, the final vector, closely aligns with establishing identity and clarifying purposes. Chickering and Reisser (1993) wrote that developing integrity involves overlapping stages of humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence. Students will shift from strict beliefs in absolute rules to a relative outlook before choosing the rules to guide them and their life circumstances (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students, then, develop congruence when they achieve a behavior that is uniform with their individualized values (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Moreover, Chickering and Reisser (1993) wrote seven environmental factors — including student-faculty relationships, teaching, and curriculum — influence student development (Evans et al., 2010). Chickering and Reisser (1993) claimed “any environment is a system or a totality of interacting parts” (p. 279), suggesting “an educationally powerful environment coordinates all elements” (p. 279). Evans et al. (2010) emphasized Chickering and Reisser (1993) had a notable impact on interventions in higher education. It’s important, however, to remain aware of the limitations of Chickering and Reisser’s theory and to appreciate its value when used correctly (Evans et al., 2010). With this in mind, college instructors should acknowledge the usefulness of the seven vectors but remain intimately involved in the educational process and seek innovative approaches to student development.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to use Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory of education and identity to understand students’ perspectives of how their experience in an advanced agricultural communications media writing course helped them develop their identities as writers.

- RQ1: What teaching techniques contributed to students’ development of competence in an advanced media writing course?
- RQ2: How does an advanced media writing course contribute to students’ development of their sense of integrity and their professional identity and purpose as writers?
- RQ3: How do students in an advanced media writing course move from being autonomous to be interdependent?
- RQ4: How do students develop relationships and manage emotions in an advanced media writing course?

Context of the Study

Agricultural Media Writing II is an undergraduate major-specific course that is the second of two writing-intensive courses Texas A&M University students majoring or minoring in agricultural communications and journalism are required to complete. It builds on the skills learned in *Agricultural Media Writing I* by allowing students to apply those skills to increasingly complex writing situations. Students write soft news stories for print and electronic media. They learn how to gather information from interviews and print materials, format stories for a particular medium, and write for a target audience. Course exercises and feedback help students refine their editing skills as they develop competencies that would be expected in professional settings. Upon completion of the course, students should be comfortable with gathering information; be able to write clearly, creatively and concisely using Associated Press (AP) style; and have obtained a basic knowledge of how to report facts in a clearly objective manner.

Agricultural Media Writing II is taught each fall, spring, and summer semester. The 15-week, two-component course met four days a week and was taught during the spring 2014 semester. The lecture component of the course met twice weekly and was 50 minutes in length. The laboratory component met twice weekly and was 75 minutes in length. The course featured weekly lectures designed to stimulate creativity, improve writing skills, and serve as a complement to the course's laboratory exercises and major writing assignments. The laboratory exercises included AP style quizzes, copy editing exercises, group work, research assignments, and weekly small incremental assignments that funneled into the course's major assignments. An instructor was present and available to assist students during each laboratory session.

Students were required to complete three major writing assignments. For the first major assignment, students were given the option of writing a column or a review. The column option allowed students to write about any topic with some connection to agriculture. The review option required students to write a review about a restaurant, movie, or book. Criteria for the first assignment included 500 to 600 words; proper attribution, grammar, and mechanics; and a topic statement specifying a target audience and target publication for the story.

The second major assignment was an informational/educational or how-to soft news story. Students could pick their topic for the second major assignment as long as it was connected to agriculture. Criteria for the second assignment included 600 to 800 words, use of at least two interview sources and one print source, and proper attribution, grammar, and mechanics. Prior to topic approval, students submitted a query letter that included a discussion of the topic, a target audience, a target publication, the student's qualification to write about the topic, and the method of follow up.

For major assignment three, students completed a personality profile or a descriptive soft news story. Students selected their own topic as long as it was related in some way to agriculture. Criteria for the third major assignment included 1,000 to 1,200 words with a minimum of three interview sources and one print source as well as proper attribution, grammar, and mechanics. A query letter also was required for major assignment three.

Formative and summative feedback was provided within one week for laboratory assignments and two weeks for major assignments, and students could rewrite each of the major writing assignments. An important ingredient in major writing assignments two and three was a peer edit conducted during a regularly scheduled laboratory session. Students were required to complete peer reviews. However, they were given the liberty to incorporate the suggested revisions and edits as they saw fit. Mandatory editor meetings with the course instructor were required for each students' third

Method

This qualitative study investigated how agricultural communications students in an advanced media writing course developed writing identity. We sought deep insights from students into the developmental challenges they faced during the course as well as how they constructed their own identity framework throughout the course. We also recognized the intimate interaction between the environment and the students made it impossible to separate the course context from the students themselves. For these reasons, this research problem necessitated investigation by qualitative methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As a means of evaluating the effectiveness of the course, the instructor asked all students to complete a one-page reflection evaluating their experiences in the course. These evaluative reflections served as the data for this study. The population for this study was undergraduate agricultural communications students enrolled in *Agricultural Media Writing II* at Texas A&M University during the spring 2014 semester ($N = 57$). The majority of the students were upper-class, female students majoring in agricultural communications and journalism. Prior to enrolling in the advanced media writing course, students had completed an introductory media writing course. Students were asked to reflect on their advanced media writing course experience by answering four questions:

1. Describe yourself as a writer before this class and now.
2. What class activities helped you the most (e.g., peer review, instructor feedback, AP style quizzes)?
3. At what point in the course did you begin to see writing differently?
4. How has this course helped develop your idea of writing as a profession?

Each participant received a random two-digit number identifier ranging from one to 57. Each one-page reflection was unitized or broken down into words and phrases that held meaning as a unit (Merriam, 2009). Each unit was labeled with a sequential code. Therefore, the first unit of student 25 was labeled as 25:01.

Data were analyzed using analytic induction (Patton, 2002). Analytic induction uses an established theory to provide a framework for analyzing qualitative data, extending the application of that theory into new contexts. In this case, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of college student development was used as the lens through which we analyzed the student reflection data to extend the understanding of college student development into development of writing identity. Although the data aligned with the seven vectors outlined in Chickering and Reisser's theory of education and identity, the data were not collected based on the theory. After we began the initial data analysis, we realized the data fit the theory. At that time, we chose analytic induction using Chickering and Reisser's theory. Within each vector, the data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative studies require special attention to trustworthiness. To achieve credibility (Merriam, 2009), the certainty that findings match reality, we kept a reflexive journal and engaged in persistent observation. The course instructors kept reflexive journals through their teaching experience and through the course of the data analysis. Instructors achieved persistent observation as they taught students throughout the semester.

To achieve dependability (Merriam, 2009), the certainty that results are consistent with the data, we triangulated the data, circulated peer debriefing memos, and kept an audit trail. Data were triangulated using theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and instructor observation. Instructors and

researchers circulated peer debriefing memos among ourselves and to other qualified peers as a check of our analysis. The audit trail connects the data to the theory, and that served as our interpretive framework. To achieve transferability (Merriam, 2009), or applicability to other outside settings, we used thick description in reporting the results so readers might be able to easily determine whether the findings could apply to their own settings. Reflexive journals, triangulation, and peer debriefing memos also served to build confirmability, assurance of objectivity (Merriam, 2009).

Findings

Students in this course experienced joys and frustrations, setbacks and victories during the semester. A central question students asked themselves was, “Do I have what it takes to be a writer?” (25.01). Students wrestled with this question through struggling to gain skills by analyzing and personalizing their values of self and of writing, by taking on writing responsibilities and challenges, and by balancing their emerging feelings with feedback from others and their past notions of what it means to write.

Research Question One

Which teaching techniques contributed to the development of students’ writing skill competence in this course? Students needed to develop specific skillsets to achieve the learning outcomes for the course and to complete the required assignments and experiences. One student noted, “I was always so scared to write, and I didn’t truly love it, but now I have confidence” (6.11). So, how did students develop skills and confidence in those skills?

At first, students finished writing assignments by “throw[ing] things together” (51.08) and “sitting in front of a computer and typing ... until reach[ing] the desired word count” (34.12). As students reflected on their beginning approach and skill level, one noted lectures were “uncomfortable and made me squirm” (20.11).

Although lecture caused some students to “squirm, it was the clicking point where I learned” (20.11) valuable writing skills. One student recalled a specific lecture, “I really enjoyed the Oreo lecture because it was fun and a cool way to apply what we were doing” (48.05). Applying lecture concepts in daily writing exercises “helped make writing more enjoyable” (31.15). Students noted that, during lecture, “I realized the only way to be a better writer is to practice” (27.19). Opportunities to apply concepts in guided settings supported this student’s adoption of the approach in writing that “the order of information is ... key to writing a great piece” (24.03).

“Credible edits” (24.07) helped students gain skills like “mak[ing] my writing more efficient” (24.07). The instructor “did things that really helped develop us individually, instead of just teaching us the steps of writing a feature story or a review” (31.15). Instructor and peer feedback helped students improve their savvy as not only producers of writing but also consumers of writing. They noted the desire to “write something everyone wants to read” (24.06). The journalistic style “made reading the paper easier as the reader’s eye was more willing to dive into a digestible short paragraph rather than a longwinded large paragraph” (40.05). They realized good authors were skilled at “beckoning the reader to continue through their work” (40.05) and were “challenge[d] to take [their] story telling talents to the next level” (49.05).

To assist students in developing journalistic style writing skills, they completed writing style quizzes in class. Some found them a positive skill challenge, saying “I found these [AP style quizzes] very helpful” (57.11). Others disdained these exercises as “rarely help[ing] me improve as a writer” (19.13). Almost all students, however, did see that they “serve a purpose” (19.13) of enhancing their

skillset. Class experiences helped students apply their writing skills and do hands-on work (48.05) to become better writers through “practice” (27.19) and increase their skills and “confidence” (6.11) as both consumers and producers of writing.

Research Question Two

How did this course contribute to students’ integrated sense of self and to their professional identity as writers? Students grew in their perception of themselves as potential writing professionals and in their overall sense of self as competent and worthwhile writers. “I have always been someone that thought words are a powerful thing, and this class just reinforced that” (41.02).

One portion of students felt that the class “reinforced” (41.02) their path while another reflected that the class had turned them off — “I just don’t love it like I did before” (30.11). What was the difference between these two distinct groups?

Students in the first group reflected positively on the class exercises. These students enjoyed peer and instructor feedback, noting that “it was a breakthrough ... [and] made me break out of my shell a little bit and feel more comfortable with myself and my style of writing” (34.06). Another student noted getting acclimated to taking criticism “without getting offended is something that takes time to develop” (17.03). Students in this group also showed positive sentiment toward the style taught in the class — it “unlocked a whole new world in writing” (46.10). One student noted, “playing the field as a writer is a very important aspect, especially in the news world, but being able to adjust yourself and your writing style is imperative” (4.19).

These students also “had fun interviewing people and writing in this class” (20.14). They reported falling “in love with writing” (43.12) and “looking at positions that require a lot of writing” (6.13) because they knew they could be “successful in that career” (20.14).

On the other hand, the group that “[didn’t] love it like they did before” (30.11) had difficulties with the experiences offered by the course. The peer feedback experiences caused one student to reflect, “I do not want to be a professional writer ... I already get intimidated enough when a peer edits my paper. I would sweat bullets if I had a professional editor edit my paper every week” (35.35). Even after multiple exposures to style quizzes, these students recognized they “have a bad habit of voicing [their] opinion in works, allowing [their] style to show” (4.13). These students reflected, “I’m not sure it’s the path I want to take anymore” (30.11), but considered it “a viable option for which [they] were qualified” (30.11). Students also noted desiring “to be a better writer” (53.11) even though they were not indicating a desire to pursue a career in writing.

In the end, students universally reflected “writers were undervalued” (21.12) and writing was more challenging than they expected. “I like the idea of writing as a profession more than the actual act of writing” (17.09). Students began to see the beauty and universal value of writing used to “paint beautiful pictures” (5.14) and moved forward in their understanding of themselves as a part of the writing profession.

Research Question Three

How do students move from autonomy to interdependence in a writing course? How do students learn to take responsibility for their goals, to become self-directed, and to think critically? Students developed the ability to “take everyone’s suggestions, but ... had enough faith” (34.08) in themselves to make good writers’ decisions.

In the beginning, students saw writing processes as “simple” (12.05) and “boring” (49.01). They appraised their writing as “poor” (16.01) and without “organized structure” (16.01). The course chal-

lenged students. “I never thought a writing class could be so demanding. Even though we just had three papers, each one challenged me in a different way” (57.07). Also, interviewing people for a story challenged students’ perception that “research was boring” (49.01). A student noted feeling “scared” (19.11) before she started, but did the activity anyway. “After I asked one person, it was like a wall fell down” (19.11).

Journalistic style challenged students’ disorganization. One student reflected that before, “writing [was] like a painting, a mixing of colors coming together to make something beautiful” (49.09). But after the course, writing was more of an “equation” (49.09) that could be seen either way, “depending on what I want to write” (49.09).

Writing “what I want to write” (49.09) and seeing the “rough drafts become better each time I made changes” (3.07) helped students become more self-directed. A few students noted they planned to take on novel-writing projects in their free time and knew that “tak[ing] time out of each day to write” (25.04) would help them become better writers. Daily practice would help them “see the paper with fresh eyes” (25.04) every day.

In addition to daily practice, students saw the value of feedback in making their work better. “Positive encouragement is great to hear, and negative feedback helps make your work even stronger, so it was a win-win situation” (37.08). Students saw this kind of interaction as critical to learning, “The harsher the criticism, the more it is remembered” (4.10).

Overall, students took on new challenges to interact with themselves and with others in ways that gave them “faith in [themselves]” (34.08), a “want to write” (49.09), an increase in their “organization structure” (49.09), and a need to overcome the feeling of being “scared” (19.11) about writing processes.

Research Question Four

How do students handle developing relationships and managing emotions through a writing course? Initially, students felt “scare[d]” (29.11) and “nerve rack[ed]” (42.06) by reviewing their peers’ work. They felt like writing was a “monster” (7.02) and “a stale burden” (9.09). How did they move toward feeling “comfortable” (50.07) with their peers and feeling like writing was “insightful and therapeutic?” (28.12)

In the beginning, students reflected that past writing assignments had caused them to feel they had “lost confidence in ... writing” (38.03), so they “shied away from it” (38.03). By taking advantage of the daily practice offered in class and participating in the course experiences, students “began to view writing as more of a creative process rather than a stale burden” (29.11). By undergoing this process, this student noted “writing became fun and colorful” (29.11) while communicating the perception “it was still really hard” (29.11). By tackling the class experiences, students experienced “how insightful and therapeutic writing can be” (28.12) in helping process life experiences.

Peer reviews put students into novel forms of student-to-student relationships. Through the course, students “learned how to peer review” (9.05). Students were aware of the new position and the “nerve racking” (42.06) balance of issuing critique to peers “because [they] didn’t want to come off as picky or overcritical” (42.06). As the assignments progressed and students practiced this new social frame, they became more “comfortable asking questions [their] peers might not want to deal with” (50.07). Students also received instructor feedback that helped students “see the instructor’s style of writing” (36.08) and understand how to perform to the instructor’s standards. That student noted taking the instructor feedback sessions “more seriously than a friend reading it” (36.08). One

noted the value of peer review for class performance, “on major assignment 2, my peer review

helped me to the point where my whole paper had to be changed because it was not written correctly” (14.05).

Through practicing writing and peer reviewing, students were able to “see that journalism isn’t quite the monster [they] made it out to be” (7.02). Students began to see writing as “fun and colorful” (9.09) as well as “therapeutic” (28.12). The fear of being seen as “picky and overcritical” (42.06) during peer review was replaced by feeling “comfortable” (50.07) asking difficult questions. Students processed new social forms and difficult emotions through the course experiences.

This course offered students an array of opportunities to experience the ups and downs of college student life. Students gained “confidence” (6.11) in skills they gained. They experienced things that “reinforced” (41.02) their perceptions of themselves as writers or “intimidated” (35.15) them, causing them to rethink their career paths. Students noted a “demanding” (57.07) class helped them “have faith in themselves” (34.08) and in their peer interactions. Students began to see writing as a fun, therapeutic outlet where peer critique became a comfortable and valuable form of interaction.

The question of “Do I have what it takes to be a writer?” (25.01) was answered in many ways through the course experiences. It was answered differently by different students. Almost universally, though, students felt writing was a “vital skill” (51.07) for any job and felt more “qualified” (30.11) to take on writing activities — from “looking at positions that require a lot of writing” (6.13) to “not sure” (30.11) if it was their desired path.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Students in the spring 2014 *Agricultural Media Writing II* used the course as a vehicle to become media writers who could identify themselves as writers even if they did not intend to pursue a writing career. In this study, students showed evidence of moving through, at different times and at different rates, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seven vectors of college student development.

Student–faculty relationships, noted by Chickering and Reisser (1993) as influential in college student development, were key factors in students’ development of their writing identity. Feedback was a key player in students’ ability to move from being autonomous to being interdependent and helped them become more confident in their writing abilities. Students valued the human connection and the one-on-one feedback the instructor provided them, and they appreciated the encouragement received from their peers, which Chickering and Reisser (1993) described as developing interpersonal competence. Although peer feedback was not as constructive or as powerful as students would have liked, it did help them become critics of others’ work and become more effective and engaging writers.

Each phase of the course was taught independently but connected to help students understand and work through the writing process, which is a factor important to students’ movement from autonomous to interdependent (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students showed improvement throughout the semester, but the majority of them cited the second major assignment as the turning point assignment and the point at which they either identified themselves as writers or they did not. Perhaps this was because students were engaged and immersed in a structured writing process for the development of the second major assignment. Students were walked through and provided feedback at each step in the process — from brainstorming and query letter proposal to final revisions and edits. This teaching method helped students to not only understand the writing process but also improve each step before it had the potential to negatively impact their grades.

Reading story examples during class helped students improve their creative writing abilities because they were given the opportunity to engage in free writing that enabled them to be creators

and not just writers. A prerequisite to the advanced media writing course is the basic media writing course where students learn about hard news writing and how to write for quick consumption using who, what, when, where, and why. Therefore, the first four weeks of the advanced media writing course is designed to help students become more creative media writers who stay true to the facts while telling a compelling story. Media writing relies on the author's ability to tell the story in a creative way that engages the reader. Students engaged in creative writing exercises that enhanced their writing style and voice and moved them to become story tellers and not just writers. Tappenden noted in 2010 that telling stories confirms identity. Thus, as students tell stories in a media writing course, they have the potential to confirm and develop identity, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) fifth vector. Perhaps, giving students the opportunity to hone their creativity skills and tell stories contributed to their course enjoyment.

Students' thoughts about writing changed as a result of the course. Leggette (2013) noted an understanding of discourse community is important to seeing writing as worthwhile because the discourse community encourages cognitive processes and writing confidence. Because of the discourse community established within the course, students, now, understand and respect effective writing and writing professions even if they choose not to pursue a writing career. They understand being an author takes work because writing is more than grammar and punctuation.

The course guided students' values and behaviors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) in adopting new writing practices — they now conduct in-depth topic-related research, write every day in short increments, read their stories aloud while revising and editing, and seek advice and opinions from peers. Some students came into the advanced media writing course with an understanding of writing-related values, but they had not yet personalized those values (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). For example, student four seemed to be at a critical point in establishing writing identity and a slight push one way or the other by the professor may have had an impact on her personalization of writing values. The value is not in the word but in the author's ability to connect words into a cohesive structure that captures an audience.

Chickering and Reisser's theory of education and identity has not been cited as a commonly used theory in written communication research, but it does have applicability. Extending the theory into the writing classroom has unique implications that could transform writing instruction in agricultural communication programs. Based on the evidence provided in this study, agricultural communications instructors should focus on teaching students the pathway to the end product and not focus on teaching the end product. When students work through the process, they immerse themselves into telling the story, an input for confirming identity and building community (Tappenden, 2010). Instructors should stress the importance of storytelling and not just writing because authors may be more invested in their work when they can identify with the story.

Further, the environment (discourse community) was important in students' development of confidence and cognitive processes because they gained constructive feedback that helped them work through the writing process, also noted by Leggette (2013). Writing done in a solitary or group environment needs constructive feedback in an organized, guided manner. The feedback process should be a structured process that includes both instructor and peer feedback. Instructors should provide students feedback during each phase of the writing process to be proactive in catching mistakes. Moreover, instructors should use the feedback process as a chance to teach students how to provide critiques and valuable, constructive feedback to their peers because providing feedback is a skill students can learn and transfer to other capacities.

It is important to note this study cannot be generalized beyond the population because it is one

study conducted with a specific cohort at a particular time. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted on what components of the second major writing assignment helped students become more effective writers and helped them develop identity as writers. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted the importance of environmental influences in students' development that are prevalent in media writing courses and should be explored to determine the most influential environmental influences. Additionally, more research needs to be conducted on the environments that encourage students' creativity in media writing.

Implications

Undeniably, students developed their writing identity in the advanced media writing course. Students' development of their writing identity was enhanced by the environmental influences Chickering and Reisser explored in-depth in 1993. The environment, or discourse community, in which the writing occurs, impacts the level and breadth that the student gains confidence (Leggette, 2013), which impacts students' identity development. Students were given the opportunity to be creative in an environment that encouraged content development guided by consistent feedback and writing practice, which should be representative of the professional writing environment. Consequently, agricultural communications instructors should work to provide students with a realistic environment representative of the workplace.

Understanding how students develop identity will help agricultural communications instructors not only prepare students to communicate but also equip them with the education and identity they need to contribute to the 21st century workforce. Students enter college looking to find themselves and identify with their role in society, as George noted in 2012. Therefore, because writing can be used as a tool to clarify meaning, students can use opportunities in media writing courses to establish their identity and clarify their purpose and career goals.

Hence, writing is a tool to interpret assumptions, make meaning, solidify intentions, and convey knowledge. Writing is more than communication.

References

- Beaufort, A. (1999). *Writing in the real world: Making the transition from school to work*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Brockman, E., Taylor, M., Kreth, M., & Crawford, M. K. (2011). What do professors really say about college writing? *English Journal*, 100(3), 75–81. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/EJ/1003-jan2011/EJ1003What.pdf>
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Gries, L. (2011). Agential matters: Tumbleweed, Women-Pens, Citizens-Hope, and Rhetorical Actancy. In S. I. Dobrin (Ed.), *Ecology, writing theory, and new media: Writing ecology* (pp. 67–91). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Evans, N. J., Forney D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Foster, D. (1983). *A primer for writing teachers: Theories, theorists, issues, problems*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc.
- Foubert, J., Nixon, M., Sisson, V. S., & Barnes, A. C. (2005). A longitudinal study of Chickering and Reisser's vectors: Exploring gender differences and implications for refining the theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(5), 461–471. doi: 10.1353/csd.2005.0047

- George, S. (2012). The performed self in college writing: from personal narratives to analytic and research essays. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 12(2), 319–341. doi: 10.1215/15314200-1503613
- Gottschalk, K., & Hjortshoj, K. (2004). *The elements of teaching writing: A resources for instructors in all disciplines*. New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martins.
- Leggette, H. R. (2013). A model to augment critical thinking and create knowledge through writing in the social science of agriculture. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Texas A&M University, College Station, TX.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Lunsford, A. A., Fishman, J., & Liew, W. M. (2013). College writing, identification, and the production of intellectual property: Voices from the Stanford study of writing. *College English*, 75(5), 470–492. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1348271701/fulltextPDF?accountid=7082>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Strachan, W. (2008). *Writing intensive: Becoming W-faculty in a new writing curriculum*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Tappenden, C. (2010). Out of our minds: Exploring attitudes to creative writing relating to art and design practice and personal identity. *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 3(3), 257–283. doi: 10.1386/jwcp.3.3.257_1
- Watson, T., & Robertson, J. T. (2011). Perceptions of agricultural communications freshmen regarding curriculum expectations and career aspirations. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 95(3), 6–20. Retrieved from http://journalofappliedcommunications.org/images/stories/issues/2011/jac_v95_n3_article1.pdf

About the Authors

Holli Leggette's research is focused on understanding, evaluating, and improving writing skills of agriculturalists. Much of her work is based on her conceptual model to augment critical thinking and create knowledge through writing in the social sciences of agriculture. Holly Jarvis' professional interests include producing learner-centered educational materials, providing professional development for extension specialists, and developing continuing education curricula. She also has extensive experience working in non-profit educational settings. David Walther is a doctoral student with research interests in communication channels and diffusion networks. He worked previously in broadcasting, holding a variety of positions in that industry.