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Discovering Perceptions of the Essence of College-Level Writing: Transcendental Phenomenological Inquiry in a Midwestern Community College

Nathan B. Jones

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DISCOVERING PERCEPTIONS OF THE ESSENCE OF COLLEGE-LEVEL WRITING:
TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY IN A
MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2016

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The perceptions of six community college faculty members about the qualities of college-level writing were explored in a series of guided interviews conducted at Prairie Community College (a pseudonym) located in the central time zone of the United States. The study examined the perceptions of the six faculty members with regard to important characteristics of college-level writing, acceptable multiple discourses within college-level writing, and perceptions of faculty members from different academic disciplines about college-level writing. Interview data were analyzed through the lens of transcendental phenomenology.

The results showed that the six community college faculty members differed greatly by academic discipline about what they perceived college-level writing to be. The English faculty members believed that college-level writing consists of grammatically correct sentences presented within essay structures. However, faculty members of biology, economics, and mathematics were much more open in their perceptions about what could be accepted as college-level writing.

The results of the study suggest a need for dialogue among faculty members of different disciplines within community colleges about the characteristics of college-level

writing and what community college students need to learn to become successful college-level writers.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY

Background

Approximately three years ago, I attended a meeting among faculty members of the English and Journalism Division of Prairie Community College (PCC), a pseudonym for a community college located in the central time zone of the United States, to discuss selection of a new composition textbook. About 40 full-time and adjunct faculty members attended the meeting, hosted by a large publisher. During the meeting, the publisher's representative, who happened to be the textbook's author and a full-time faculty member at a large Midwestern university, asked us to brainstorm about what we considered to be the essential characteristics of college-level writing. As we offered our opinions, the representative wrote our responses on the whiteboard in the front of the room.

Some colleagues began by suggesting that college-level writing should be free of punctuation errors. Another suggested that it should be free of comma splices, fragments, and run-on sentences, to which several of my colleagues nodded their heads in agreement. One stated that it should have a clear thesis statement with clear topic sentences for each paragraph. Then another pointed out that it should have outside support and follow MLA or APA conventions for sources. At this point, one colleague stated emphatically, "Any paper with more than seven grammar errors in it should get an F." Another responded that writing could be missing all of these structural elements, but if it had a creative interpretation of an idea to challenge a widely held assumption,

then it qualified as college-level writing in its best tradition. To this assertion, several colleagues in the audience laughed, claiming that great ideas presented in sloppy prose could not possibly be considered as good writing, college-level or otherwise. Next, a colleague mentioned that college-level writing was really whatever our students wrote in our college classes, to which there was more laughter. After about 30 minutes of this exchange, the representative, pointing to the long list of characteristics that he had written on the whiteboard, finally asked, “Can we agree on a core, or would it be safer to agree to disagree? Or should we just include all of these items on our list?” We agreed to avoid further conflict by including everything on the list, and the representative then proceeded to advise us about how his textbook could address many of our disparate concerns.

I thought a lot about what I heard that night. I thought of the students in our community college who were often working minimum-wage jobs, trying to support themselves and their families, relying upon us to teach them how to write, how to become more competitive as workers and as students. I thought of the county taxpayers, who were paying our salaries and sending their children to us for an affordable education. For if we were tasked with the responsibility of teaching and assessing academic writing within our community college, we should have probably first attempted to understand from inquiry more about what we ourselves as compositionists perceived college-level writing to be. A better understanding of what our colleagues perceived college-level writing to be may have had profound implications

upon our teaching and assessment of writing in the community college. So I decided to explore this topic in my dissertation research.

To conduct this study, I wanted to use a research method that would empower me to explore beliefs of a diverse group of community college faculty members about college-level writing, with minimal distortion from the researcher's personal lens. An important assumption within transcendental phenomenology is that a committed researcher can, through the processes of phenomenological analysis, identify a core set of perceptions, an essence, among multiple perspectives. In other words, when confronted with multiple perspectives about a particular phenomenon, a practitioner of transcendental phenomenology would seek to find common points of agreement and to articulate these perceptions as the essence of the phenomenon for the individuals studied. This view challenges directly the assumption that there can be no common set of perceptions held by those who perceive a particular phenomenon from a variety of different perspectives. Writes Moustakas (1994), "Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved" (p. 58). Along the way toward developing an understanding of the essence of a phenomenon, it is advisable to explore the origins of perceptions, about how perceptions may change, about how perceptions may not change, about the origins of doubt, and about the resolution of doubt.

In this study, I wanted to try to learn more about the perceptions of six community college faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing

and to explore opportunities for continued research in this area. I understood that the findings of the study, based upon interview data collected from six participants, could not reflect the perceptions of all faculty members in community colleges about the characteristics of college-level writing. This study is an early step in the process of working toward a better understanding of the situation.

Research Context

The concept of college-level writing is complex and highly contested, difficult to define in a way that would be acceptable for all invested groups. Nevertheless, Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), in a qualitative study that focused on the perceptions of academic writing among 14 full-time faculty members and 183 students at George Mason University (GMU), confirmed what the authors believed to be important, fundamental characteristics of academic writing. They predicted, and their work suggested, that academic writing, first, has evidence that the writer has been “persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study”, second, shows “dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception,” and third, “focuses on an “imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (pp. 5-7).

To test their predictions, Thaiss and Zawacki gathered information from several sources. They wanted to know what faculty members thought about the characteristics of academic writing and what students thought about it. They conducted in-depth interviews with 14 faculty members in 14 different disciplines, they administered short-answer and Likert Scale surveys about academic writing to 183 students, they conducted focus groups with 36 students to explore in greater depth some of the issues

mentioned in the surveys, they examined the responses of faculty members to student essays in assessment workshops, and they examined timed essays written by 40 undergraduate students about the experience of learning to write in an academic setting. Based on their collection and analysis of data, Thaiss and Zawacki concluded that their predictions about the characteristics of academic writing were correct.

In addition, Thaiss and Zawacki discovered that the complete portrait of academic writing at GMU was far more complex than the three-point framework suggested. They found that within academic writing reside multiple discourses that digress from traditional forms. In other words, there were routine exceptions to the three rules. To illustrate, in their second point, Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) claimed that academic writing emphasized dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception. Yet, as the authors pointed out in their discussion of a faculty member who published in the field of philosophy, the discussion of deeply personal, emotionally laden topics within the postmodern context was appropriate: "She wrote about her academic path into philosophy, her identity as a woman and a Jew, and her feminism" (p. 74). These kinds of multiple discourses may have also been encouraged by the kinds of writing assignments that some faculty members gave to students. For example, Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) found that in the fields of nursing and sociology, faculty members gave students writing assignments encouraging "a deep emotional engagement with the topic and that they will, in turn, convey this feeling to readers in a way to motivate some kind of social change" (p. 75).

Although the study by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) was helpful, generalizations forthcoming about the nature of academic writing in American higher education based upon this work needed to be tempered by the study's research design. To begin, the research setting—George Mason University (GMU)—was not typical of American colleges. As the authors described, “GMU itself is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse universities in the country, with more than 25 percent of students nonnative speakers of English, a rich mix from around the globe (more than 100 language backgrounds represented” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 27). Likewise, GMU had—according to Thaiss and Zawacki (2006)—established itself as a selective academic institution. At the time of their study, it offered 60 bachelors' degrees, 62 masters' degrees, and one law degree. Reflecting this academic success, the 14 selected faculty informants included in the study were from a distinguished group of academics, as they were all tenured or tenure-line faculty members of a Carnegie Research II university, and all of them had demonstrated success as accomplished academic writers in their fields.

Not all college faculty in the United States teach at institutions similar to GMU. How could the conclusions found by Thaiss and Zawacki about the perceived nature of academic writing among faculty members of a Carnegie Research II university be generalized to the experiences of faculty members teaching at other academic institutions, especially those in American community colleges? Clearly, community colleges, with their open admissions policies, were not comparable to academic institutions like GMU. According to my own exploration of the published literature up to

the point in time of the drafting of this dissertation, including exploration of the databases *Academic Onefile*, *Dissertation Abstracts*, *Education Resources Information Center*, and *Google Scholar*, and personal exploration of key, relevant academic journals such as *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, and *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, very little—beyond the kind of anecdotal accounts and academic reflections cited in this literature review—was known from systematic study about what community college faculty members within and outside of English departments perceived college-level writing to be and how it needed to be taught.

Because community colleges typically do not offer advanced degrees beyond the Associate's, because their faculty members generally do not have obligations to publish articles in peer-reviewed academic journals like their colleagues in four-year colleges and universities do, and because attainment of the PhD is generally not a minimum prerequisite for their faculty positions, it is risky to assume that community college faculty members would agree with faculty members at four-year colleges and universities about the characteristics of college-level writing and how it should be taught. The predictions presented and confirmed by Thaiss and Zawacki about the nature of college-level writing at GMU were not tested systematically within the context of a community college. Therefore, our understanding of the nature of college-level writing as perceived by faculty members, especially within the context of the community college, was limited.

I did not want to replicate in a community college context in lock-step fashion the study originally conducted by Thaiss and Zawacki at GMU. Rather, I built upon the

momentum of their work by focusing this study on the perceptions of *faculty members*, not students, about the qualities of academic writing within a community college context and how it needed to be taught. I placed the focus of the study upon perceptions of faculty members, because they were the ones who taught students how to write and, ultimately, assessed its quality within their institutions. After the data were collected and analyzed, I considered some implications, both pedagogical and social, surrounding perceptions of faculty members about college-level writing in the community college.

Research Questions

Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) conducted a thoughtful, systematic, and often-cited study of perceptions of faculty members and students at George Mason University (GMU) about the characteristics of college-level writing within a research university. I explored this topic within the context of the community college where I worked: Prairie Community College (PCC) in the central time zone of the United States. Three research questions guided this study:

1. How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe college-level writing? Do their descriptions reflect the descriptions of college-level writing presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) in their study at GMU?
2. How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe multiple discourses? What are these discourses? Who uses them? Under what conditions? How might these conditions be similar to, and different from, the descriptions found by Thaiss and Zawacki in their study at GMU?

3. What do faculty members of different disciplines in this study at PCC describe as trends in college-level writing, according to their own individual perceptions?

Overview of Research Design

According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology is one form of qualitative research or, as he sometimes calls it, human science research. There are at least seven points that connect transcendental phenomenology to the qualitative research tradition. These seven points are quoted below:

1. recognizing the value of qualitative designs and methodologies, studies of human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches
2. focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts
3. searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations
4. obtaining descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews
5. regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations
6. formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher

7. viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21)

This transcendental phenomenological study included as part of its design what many scholars would recognize as qualitative research practices. I gathered and analyzed information from open-ended interviews about how full-time and adjunct faculty members at PCC reported their perceptions of college-level writing and how they perceived that it needed to be taught. Using open-ended questions, I encouraged participants to respond as they wished, to describe their perceptions and their experiences as they liked (Nunan, 1992; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). This provided me with opportunities to gather some unexpected answers to my questions, which were useful for data analysis. Writes Nunan (1992): “While responses to closed questions are easier to collate and analyze, one often obtains more useful information from open questions. It is also likely that responses to open questions will more accurately reflect what the respondent wants to say” (p. 143).

Related to the value of using open-ended questions was the use of the human instrument as a research tool. Qualitative researchers become closely connected with, and highly knowledgeable about, the social setting and the participants included in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). In this case, I was working within the context of Prairie Community College, a place where I had been teaching for several years and where I held the rank of a tenured associate professor. Because of my

knowledge of the institution and my status within it, I had access to colleagues to invite them to participate in interviews.

Another benefit to this study about using qualitative research methodology was the use of inductive study of a local context (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was a desirable characteristic because it enabled me to collect information directly from colleagues in PCC about their perceptions of college-level writing with minimal interference or distortion. Too often, when outside theories were deductively applied in a local research setting, the results could lead to disappointing research outcomes. Caution Glaser and Strauss (1967), “The verifier may find that the speculative theory has nothing to do with his [sic] evidence, unless he [sic] forces a connection” (p. 29). This was also an important distinction between my study and the one conducted by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) at GMU, as I was not conducting this research to test three of my own hypotheses. Instead, I was looking for principles that would emerge inductively from my data via application of transcendental phenomenology. By working independently within the tradition of transcendental phenomenology, I was in position to control for sources of internal bias and reach conclusions that reflected how participants in the local context perceived the phenomenon under investigation. The results were expected to deepen our understanding of the perceptions of college-level writing held by a small group of faculty members in higher education, especially within the context of teaching in a community college.

Transcendental phenomenology is a type of qualitative research. However, at least three features distinguish transcendental phenomenology from other qualitative research studies, and these differences were present in my study. Using transcendental phenomenology, I applied the *epoche* process to reduce as much as possible personal bias from influencing interpretations of results:

The researcher following a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the Epoche process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies—to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22)

Practitioners of transcendental phenomenology claim that this analytical approach may assist the researcher to identify perceptions of underlying, universal elements of a phenomenon. This feature is explained by Moustakas (1994):

Another major distinction is the emphasis on intuition, imagination, and universal structures in obtaining a picture of the dynamics that underlay the experience, account for, and provide an understanding of how it is that particular perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and sensual awarenesses are evoked in consciousness with reference to a specific experience such as jealousy, anger, or joy. (p. 22)

Furthermore, the analysis of qualitative data using transcendental phenomenology is unique. Processes include applying *epoche* to attempt to set aside prejudgments, *phenomenological reduction* to prepare data for analysis, *imaginative variation* to perceive data from a variety of perspectives, and *synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions* to arrive at an understanding of *essence* (Moustakas, 1994). The steps of data analysis using transcendental phenomenology are discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

As the title of this dissertation implies, transcendental phenomenology attempts to identify and to understand the reasons for other people's perceptions of a phenomenon. But what is a *perception*? And what is a *phenomenon*? In transcendental phenomenology, these two concepts are important and complementary. According to Husserl (1950) and Moustakas (1994), a phenomenon could be an image or an idea in the mind or an object in the material world. Writes Moustakas (1994), "the object may be imaginary and not exist at all" (p. 28). What is important is that the object has a presence in the mind and that it is accepted as real. The existence of a phenomenon does not depend upon visual confirmation by others. Perception refers to the interpretive form or presence of the phenomenon in the mind. For example, a tree may be present in the mind as a palm, if that is what the person has experienced or imagined. For another, it may be present as an oak. Or the presence of the tree may be something unrecognizable to others, yet the unusual tree would still exist in the mind that imagined it. A transcendental phenomenologist would accept as real whatever a

person would perceive to be true. “What appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears in the world is a product of learning” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27).

To learn about the perceptions of community college faculty members about college-level writing, I conducted my research by interviewing six community college faculty members. The data from the interviews provided material for a phenomenological analysis of the perceptions of a small group of community college faculty members about the characteristics of academic writing and about their perceptions concerning how it needed to be taught. Although it would be inadvisable to generalize about the perceptions of all community college faculty members about the essence of college-level writing based upon this small study of six faculty members, the data provided some helpful insights, a first step. This knowledge would contribute to our understanding of how some community college faculty members perceive college-level writing. More importantly, the study points to the need for additional research to understand more about the perceptions of community college faculty members concerning the characteristics of college-level writing.

Description of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One presents a general overview of the study. Chapter Two discusses literature relevant for a deeper understanding of the theoretical context surrounding the need for the study. Chapter Three provides a discussion of the application of transcendental phenomenology for the collection and analysis of data. Chapter Four presents the research results. Chapter Five discusses the implications of this study for research and practice.

Conclusion

To my knowledge, this was the first systematic study of community college faculty members about their perceptions of the essence of college-level writing and how it needed to be taught. Using transcendental phenomenology, it systematically explored the perceptions of a very small group of faculty members from across campus and included, for comparison purposes, faculty members of various disciplines. The results provide an initial step in understanding more about the perceptions of the nature and teaching of college-level writing in a community college context.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Much has been written about qualities of college-level writing in the United States and how to teach it. Organizing material about this broad yet important subject into a coherent narrative is challenging. However, in this chapter, I present a review that identifies three general trends in the literature about important qualities of college-level writing. These three trends are college-level writing as disciplinary writing, as personal writing, and as social justice writing. As the chapter unfolds, I show how greater understanding of the perceptions of faculty members about the qualities of college-level writing has important implications for composition teaching, particularly with regard to our understanding of the situations in community colleges. The first trend to be explored is college-level writing as disciplinary writing.

Disciplinary Writing

Writing to Learn Latin

Many have written about the importance of college-level writing to communicate disciplinary knowledge. Histories of composition in the United States often reveal that prior to the middle of the 18th century, college students studied Latin to communicate and to demonstrate knowledge of classical language, for both speaking and writing (Applebee, 1974; Halloran, 1975; Kitzhaber, 1990). Harvard and Yale Universities, academic leaders of curriculum in the American colonies, taught Latin as an academic and social communication tool until 1750, when the study of English was introduced (Halloran, 1975). The switch from the study of Latin to English in the

American colonies was part of an international trend. Observes Miller (1991), “But British English was also the Roman Latin of the American colonies, as much as it was of Africa or India, when most book collections still contained only imported volumes” (p. 29). By 1875, Harvard had expanded its English offerings to include required courses in English rhetoric in the freshman, sophomore, and junior years, with forensics in the senior year (Kitzhaber, 1990). The shift from studies of Latin to English for academic communication led to the rise of the study of English literature (Applebee, 1974), which became a focal point of the college experience.

Writing to Learn Content

The study of English writing for the purpose of learning valuable lessons from texts remains an important goal of academic work, including the teaching of modern college-level writing (Gentile, 2006; ICAS, 2002; Lujan, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; Tinberg, 1997). Nist (2005) points out that college-level writing may be understood as a complex cognitive process, one involving planning to generate ideas, translating to put thoughts into words, and reviewing to evaluate and revise the final product. For many, reading is often viewed as an important step in this cognitive process. A study of community college faculty members in California reveals that about 83 percent of faculty members surveyed claim that problems with reading contribute to students’ course failure (ICAS, 2002). Difficulty reading can be a serious problem in college studies, including writing; Tinberg (1997) claims that good college-level writing reflects a student’s ability to weave together the opinions of experts to create a new, thoughtful view. For Sullivan (2006),

the connection between reading and thought may lead to a thoughtful written discussion of abstract ideas.

That inviting students to write may be an effective tool to improve writing as well as to learn disciplinary content in various courses is also widely discussed in the literature (Gentile, 2006; Knodt; 2006; LeCourt, 1996; Lujan, 2006; Schorn, 2006; Stout, 2005). According to Gentile (2006), composition courses attempt to promote higher-order thinking skills, which are often just beginning to develop in many student writers. Lujan (2006) describes how college-level writing is a reflection of thought on paper, “a rhetorical stamp, citing the text, attributing the quotes, answering the question thoughtfully, creating intelligent prose, poetry, or poetic prose” (p. 56). Because of the association of writing with the development of thought, Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) programs promote the application of writing as a tool to improve learning in various courses. McLeod and Shirley (1988) claim that these programs are popular, with over 1,000 of them in colleges and universities across the United States.

Positive features attributed to WAC often include establishing a common faculty approach for the teaching of writing, using writing in courses as a means of learning academic material, expanding the potential repertoire of writing assignments available to students, encouraging faculty from across disciplines to collaborate on the improvement of writing and learning, and assisting faculty to respond to student writing more effectively (Stout, 2005). Knodt (2006) describes another benefit of WAC programs: teaching students how to write more effectively in many different disciplines by including faculty from various disciplines in the writing program. Schorn (2006)

argues that WAC programs strengthen the commitment of faculty across campus to improve college-level writing among students: “Giving all instructors a voice in setting the standards gives them a stake in improving student writing” (p. 334).

Writing to Belong

Learning to write in other disciplines, especially when students are required to take multiple classes at the same time with various expectations about the nature of college-level writing, can be confusing and frustrating. McCarthy (1987) illustrates this in an often-cited ethnographic study about an undergraduate student named Dave who struggled to negotiate the writing requirements of three classes: Freshman Composition, Introduction to Poetry, and Cell Biology. As McCarthy reports, although the writing requirements were similar in the three courses, Dave could not see the similarities and failed to write effectively in each of these courses. He was able to figure out the requirements to become a successful writer in composition and in biology, but success in his poetry class was elusive. Unfortunately for Dave, he could not make a personal connection with the content of the poetry class and felt alienated from it. He simply tried to master the material cognitively and to use writing to demonstrate his mastery of the material without much personal engagement. As a result, his writing in poetry suffered.

To help struggling students like Dave, English faculty may work with students to prepare them to become better writers in their selected disciplines. Yet this is a complicated mission, because it includes not only a study of textual features, but also a

study of cultural differences to understand expectations among faculty members of various academic disciplines (Faigley & Hansen, 1985).

The term *discourse community* has been applied in composition studies to refer to preferences of an audience group, based upon conditions of their work or association, about the nature of their written communication. For compositionists, the task is to interpret discourse conventions through discourse analysis, to introduce this to students. Explains Bizzell (1982) of discourse analysis, it “goes beyond audience analysis because what is most significant about members of a discourse community is not their personal preferences, prejudices, and so on, but rather the expectations they share by virtue of belonging to that particular community” (p. 219).

Swales (1990) advocates the careful study of genre and the social conditions surrounding its usage as a way to promote greater understanding and the teaching of effective disciplinary communication. He writes, “Admittedly, searching for the rationale behind particular genre features may prove elusive, but the process of seeking for it can be enlightening for the investigator—as indeed for the instructor and student” (Swales, 1990, p. 7). For Swales, a genre includes a group of communicative events with shared communicative purposes that work within recognized guidelines about content, appropriateness, and form. He argues that compositionists in WAC and EAP programs can benefit students by presenting them with features of various texts of different academic disciplines. The purpose is not to teach by formula, but simply to raise the consciousness of students about communicative values in different disciplines. He reasons, “Rather, as the immediately preceding pages show as well as any others, the

‘teaching’ has been one of consciousness-raising, of discussing texts, and of offering—to the best of our abilities—prototypical examples of relevant genres” (Swales, 1990. p. 215). Compositionists have heeded his call. For example, LeCourt (1996) reports teaching writing students in small groups how to apply discourse analysis in the academy to learn to become more effective college-level writers in various academic disciplines. Anson and Forsberg (1990), and Beaufort (1997) report on the struggles of college-level writers in learning to transition their writing to communicate within the workplace.

Features of College-Level Writing

What are important characteristics of written academic discourse? Scholars of composition have written much about the answer to this question (Addison & McGee, 2010; Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Beaufort, 1997; Bizzell, 1999; Gentile, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; Tinberg, 1997). In college-level writing, communication of important ideas is highly valued, as reported in the literature. The ability to think deeply and to communicate new insights about abstract ideas is highly prized (Addison & McGee, 2010; Gentile, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). What is more, there is often a consensus that ideas need to emerge from careful study of evidence and through the synthesis of different perspectives (Addison & McGee, 2010; Tinberg, 1997). In a survey of 544 high school and college faculty members, Addison and McGee (2010) also discovered that faculty members prefer writing that is highly organized: “among college faculty, organization was chosen more often than any other characteristic (66%), followed closely by analysis data/ideas/arguments (59%), and use supporting evidence appropriately (57%)” (p.

166). After interviewing 14 faculty members from different academic disciplines and surveying 183 students enrolled in nine sections of an advanced composition course at George Mason University, Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) conclude that academic writing, regardless of discipline, shares some essential underlying features: these include analysis of evidence in a “persistent, open-minded, and disciplined” way, the privileging of “reason over emotion,” and the attempt to persuade an imagined reader who is “coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (p. 7).

Surveys to determine the frequency of college-level assignments, especially within the context of four-year institutions, support the claim that academic writing tends to favor what Thaiss and Zawacki (2006, p. 7) call “coolly rational” communication, or the communication of abstract ideas through the careful analysis and synthesis of information and theories (Addison & McGee, 2010; Melzer, 2003; Horowitz, 1986; Santos, 1988). Working within the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Horowitz (1986) studied the handouts of 36 faculty members of UCLA and discovered that summary of readings, response to readings, report of participatory experiences, synthesis of evidence from multiple sources, and research projects were all popular assignments. Writing within the context of general composition, Melzer (2003) found among 787 undergraduate writing assignments from the web sites of 48 different academic institutions that roughly half of all writing assignments involved writing essay examinations, writing research papers, and writing journal entries. In a survey of 544 faculty members of various academic institutions, Addison and McGee (2010) found

that the most popular writing assignments included the research paper, review paper, analysis paper, and journal or reflection paper. With regard to mechanics, Santos (1988) discovered in a survey of 178 faculty members at UCLA that faculty members generally preferred good content and were somewhat more forgiving of errors of form that do not impede communication of ideas.

National surveys of undergraduate students appear to corroborate the hypotheses of Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), suggesting that within four-year colleges and universities, writing assignments often encourage disciplined application of reason over emotion for an academic reader who is presumed to be, as Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) describe, “coolly rational” (p. 7). In 2008, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) collaborated with The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) to survey 23,000 undergraduate students in 82 four-year colleges and universities in the United States about the students’ perceptions of their college writing experiences. Most students reported that they had completed writing assignments that expected them to “analyze something or argue a position, while writing about numerical data was less common” (NSSE, 2008, p. 21). Based upon the information gathered from student surveys, the NSSE (2008) presents within the context of desirable practices higher-order writing tasks “involving summarization, analysis, and argument” (p. 22).

Summary

In review, up until the middle of the 18th century, college-level writing in the United States consisted of writing Latin. Gradually, the use of English prose became popular. Writing is currently viewed by many scholars as a helpful tool to encourage

students to master disciplinary material. Within academic disciplines, the presence of discourse communities can be identified, and members of these often have preferred social conventions and written genres. Although specific genres in college-level writing may have special characteristics, some general trends may be observed. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) claim that college-level writing is “persistent, open-minded, and disciplined” and that it shows “reason over emotion.” Likewise, the reader is perceived to be “coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response.

Learning to write as a means to learn about other disciplines, and to learn about the kind of writing that occurs in other disciplines, is a popular goal of many college-level writing programs. Although not as popular, there is an important trend reflected in the literature about the value of learning college-level writing to promote personal growth, personal learning, through personal writing.

Personal Writing

Writing for Truth

Personal writing, or first-person narrative accounts of one’s own experience, is sometimes viewed as outside the realm of college-level writing. Its truth cannot be easily verified by a reader. For this reason, as Spigelman (2004) claims, many academics discount the value in teaching personal writing to writing students: “Chief among objections to teaching personal forms of writing to first-year students is concern that it fosters in developing writers a naïve investment in some kind of ‘pure’ and unmediated disclosure” (p. 66).

In spite of these hesitations, discussions of personal writing appear in the literature of college-level writing, and personal writing has its ardent supporters (Bizzell, 1999; Coles, 1978; Elbow, 1991; Macrorie, 1985; Miller & Judy, 1978; Spigelman, 2004). For expressionists, who were early proponents of personal writing, writing is a highly individual activity in which authors strive to discover new ideas and to express what they learn through unique styles of writing (Miller & Judy, 1978). Macrorie (1985) claims that writers must strive to find and tell truths, as they see things. For expressionists in general, writing needs to be learned through public sharing of written work; the purpose is not to tailor writing to meet the needs of audience, but to dialogue with the audience to help the writer to find a way to communicate in a more natural, personally relevant way (Macrorie, 1985; Miller & Judy, 1978). Spigelman (2004) points out that there are several advantages to using personal writing within academic contexts; they include recognizing the personal experiences of those, namely women and minorities, who have been previously excluded from academic publishing, and they include providing authors who apply it with valuable ethos about a particular subject. Writes Spigelman (2004), "Most feminists and multiculturalists, as well as some other critical theorists, have come to value personal writing that gives voice to the experiences and perspectives of those who are often silenced" (p. 26). Bizzell (1999) suggests that personal writing can be blended with other, less-personal forms of academic writing to create powerful, compelling written arguments; features of this hybrid would include greater tolerance of informal use of language, application of subjective analysis, acceptance of emotional responses to academic arguments, and respect for different

personal and cultural interpretations. Elbow argues that using personal writing as a means to monitor a student's learning is the best way to see whether or not the learning is actually taking place, to see if the student is able to engage with the material. Writes Elbow (1991), "Often the best test of whether a student understands something is if she can translate it out of the discourse of the textbook and the discipline into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms" (p. 137).

Publishing Personal Accounts

In spite of the controversy about accepting personal writing as a legitimate form of college-level communication, it has been embraced by some very influential academics. Perhaps chief among them is Aristotle who, roughly 2,000 years ago, wrote within the context of rhetoric, "Have some narrative in many different parts of your speech; and sometimes let there be none at the beginning of it" (1954, p. 210).

More recently, compositionists have used personal writing to publish influential essays in prestigious academic journals (Bloom, 1992; Bolker, 1979; Rich, 1972). Bloom (1992) describes in detail the struggles she endured attempting to work her way into a tenured faculty position within the field of composition. Along the way, she experienced numerous slights from male colleagues, some of whom were senior members of departments who made her struggle to earn tenure more difficult than it needed to be. Near the end of her personal essay, she recalls how she survived an attempted rape in a public shower by screaming at her assailant and fighting back. Her success in fighting off her attacker gave her the courage to find a strong voice, both personally and professionally.

Bolker (1979) describes her struggles to work with young writers, especially women, who have yet to find their own strong voices, either in life or in writing. She employs the character Gricelda in *Canterbury Tales* to describe sweet, kind, demure young women who avoid controversies. Although they are good writers, they avoid risks and fail to become great writers. To help them, Bolker advocates asking these modern-day Griceldas to perform exercises often associated with expressivism, such as freewriting, complemented with some guided readings.

As for Rich (1972), she writes about her personal struggles as a poet and a prose author trying to find her female voice in America during the socially repressive 1950s and 1960s. Although she loved poetry, during this era, there were few female poets to serve as models. Therefore, she was forced to study the works of male poets, who often wrote about women as objects in their poems in very sexist ways. Rich wrote poetry on her own as a tool to discover her needs as a human being, to find her own creative voice in a world dominated by men. Ironically, Rich found that by conforming to social expectations of her role as a woman in society, she limited the creative energy in her poetry. She writes, “But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination” (Rich, 1972, p. 23).

In the examples of these three female scholars—Bloom, Bolker, and Rich—personal writing is used to illustrate how they struggle to make sense of the world and how they decide to use their discoveries to struggle against abusive practices, both professional and personal, directed at women. Of course, by publishing their works in

College English, they bring their personal reflections into the public world, and they demonstrate that personal writing can be welcomed in the academy. Perhaps Elbow (1991) articulates the position of these compositionists best when he explains how the personal and the theoretical can be united in academic writing to create a strong, vibrant message:

Here, then, finally, is a definition of generic academic discourse that sounds right. It's essentially a rhetorical definition: giving reasons and evidence, yes, but doing so as a person speaking with acknowledged interests to others—whose interest and position one acknowledges and tries to understand. I'm for it. I try to teach it. I want my students to have it. (p. 142)

Another unique feature of personal writing may be its ability within writers and readers to encourage imaginative possibilities, to inspire social change. Instead of synthesizing existing arguments and working within the boundaries of established theory, personal writing may liberate writers to examine established ideas and theories through unique personal experiences. Writing from a feminist perspective, from the perspective of someone seeking important social change, compositionist Bridwell-Bowles (1995) claims of academic writing, "To be successful, we need to teach students conventional forms and better analytical skills, but also we need to encourage them to dream, to think in new cycles and to have visions for the future that are hopeful" (p. 47). She continues in her essay to describe her own personal experience as she and others battled sexism in the 20th century. For Bridwell-Bowles (1995), the push for realistic social change is connected with changes in academic discourse: "I no longer believe that

I can change the world, as I did when I sang along with Joan Baez, but I do believe that I can change my own discourse practices, and in so doing, I may inspire some students in my classrooms” (p. 60).

The appropriateness of personal writing within the context of higher education may depend upon several factors, including the expectations of the academic audience and the communicative needs of the academic author. Within the context of composition studies, Bloom (1992), Bolker (1979) and Rich (1972) use personal writing to advocate for social justice within the discipline. Their personal experiences as female scholars are relevant to their goals, their arguments are convincing, and their efforts are successful. Their works are published in highly prestigious academic journals. In my own case, I use personal writing to complete part of this dissertation study of faculty perceptions of college-level writing because my chosen academic research method—transcendental phenomenology—requires the researcher to share some personal writing in the bracketing step of the epoche process. In bracketing, which is discussed in much more detail in Chapter Three, the researcher shares a personal written account of his or her experience with the phenomenon to be investigated. This is a step toward accountability, as it helps the researcher to limit personal bias from influencing interpretations of interview data from participants. Hence, as long as it is appropriate to the needs of the academic paper and it respects the needs of the academic reader, it is reasonable to conclude that personal writing may serve as a very valuable tool to communicate knowledge about academic subjects and to gather important information in academic research.

Summary

As this section shows, personal writing is often criticized for enabling authors to write about truths that cannot be easily, objectively verified. Therefore, personal writing may not be considered by some to be college-level writing. Expressionists champion it, claiming that personal writing helps authors, including college-level writers, to discover and to write about their own truths, to develop their own written voices, to engage personally with academic material. Use of personal writing may encourage authors to be more imaginative, less conforming in thought. In the next section, I explore in greater depth the idea of academic writing as a function of working toward social justice, both within the academy and within the larger society.

Social Justice Writing

Writing to Identify Social Norms

Another important trend in the literature concerns the teaching of writing as a way to encourage social justice through the liberation of oppressed, socially marginalized groups (Berlin, 1982, 1988; Bridwell-Bowles, 1995; Edelstein, 2005; Shor, 1992). While it may be helpful to teach students to understand conventions of specific discourse communities and how to express personal points of view, the ultimate challenge of college-level writing, according to this perspective, is to teach students to recognize and question social norms, particularly with regard to the use of language that prohibits social advancement. James Berlin (1982), proponent of the New Rhetoric, claims that knowledge is co-created when people interact with each other using language as a communication tool: "Communication is always basic to the epistemology

underlying the New Rhetoric because truth is always truth for someone standing in relation to others in a linguistically circumscribed situation” (p. 774). This is an important principle because, as Berlin (1982) argues, when we teach college-level writing, we are doing much more than teaching students how to communicate using prescribed rules of grammar and rhetoric, because we are, in fact, teaching them about fundamental social realities. Writes Berlin (1982), “We are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it” (p. 776).

Berlin (1988) explains that any rhetoric always contains political ideology that favors a particular world view. Those who view the teaching of writing as primarily a cognitive enterprise, from Berlin’s perspective, tend to perceive reality as scientific, objective, firm, measurable. This may support the industrial order in modern capitalist society, which favors those who control capital and those who are in the middle class. What gets overlooked is how social forces affect how we often value certain world views over others, and how we tend to reward certain forms of communication over others.

When this happens, students may come to accept social norms as givens and simply acquiesce to the current state of affairs: “The existent, the good, and the possible are inscribed in the very nature of things as indisputable scientific facts, rather than being seen as humanly devised social constructions always remaining open to discussion” (Berlin, 1988, p. 484). Edelstein (2005), writing about social constructions surrounding the canon of English literature, points out that classrooms, or contact zones, are locations where competing views may collide, which may result in

experiences that are both painful and productive. States Edelstein, “Acknowledging our own and our students’ standpoints, perspectives, and multiple identities may help us negotiate the terrains of these contact zones successfully” (2005, p. 29).

Writing for Liberation

Negotiating the contact zones probably requires revolutionary pedagogy. According to Berlin, teaching students to obey discourse conventions or to emphasize the exploration of personal meanings via personal writing may be ineffective for resisting social injustice. This is because privileging individual voice reduces opportunities for the development of class consciousness and group collaboration for organized resistance. As a result, students of writing may become tools of exploitative social and political forces. Writes Berlin (1988), “Beyond this, expressionistic rhetoric is easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes” (p. 487). To properly educate students about the nature of social reality and how language contributes to our understandings, Berlin (1988) advocates the perception of rhetoric as an interaction of several variables through a dialectical process. The variables would include material reality, social reality, the individual writer, and written language. Our experience in observing the dialectical interaction of these variables provides us with understanding of how we fit into social context; however, once we understand, we have the potential to act (with others) to create meaningful social change, and the use of language is a crucial part of this revolutionary process.

Why is this important? Berlin argues that students need to understand that in order to have power and control over their own lives, they need to recognize the social

practices that make them victims, such as unquestioned consumerism, which makes them complicit in their own oppression. Explains Berlin (1988), “The most common form of reification has to do with the preoccupation with consumerism, playing the game of material acquisition and using it as a substitute for more self-fulfilling behavior” (p. 490). For others concerned about the teaching of writing to promote social justice, a proper education involves teaching students to think critically to promote multicultural democracy, both within school and within society. According to Shor (1992), the goals of empowerment through education are profound: “The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change” (p. 15). Still others, like Bridwell-Bowles (1995) argue that an important goal of a writing class is to encourage students to learn not only conventions of academic discourse, but also to encourage in them the ability to be creative, to think in new ways, to dream.

Curiously, many who publish about the need to promote social justice through the teaching of writing use personal writing as a vehicle to illustrate their views (Beech, 2004; Bridwell-Bowles, 1995; Hindman, 2001; Robillard, 2003). However, in these cases, personal writing is used as a means to draw attention to the need to change perceived social injustice. Beech (2004) describes her own working-class childhood and advocates in her writing for greater understanding among compositionists for writing students who hail from working class backgrounds. Robillard (2003), who also grew up in a working class home, describes the benefits to working class students of having them write about their experiences in college-level writing classes. Robillard claims that

personal narrative is especially helpful for many students from working class backgrounds, because it enables them to explore their past experiences and to reflect critically about meanings, which can lead to class consciousness and rejection of uncritical acceptance of contemporary social norms. Claims Robillard (2003), "Devaluing narrative, then, can deny certain students the opportunity to develop a class consciousness, thereby all but ensuring their uncritical identification with the middle class" (p. 76). Hindman (2001) argues for the use of personal writing as a means for a writer to assert a unified, empowered identity as a feminist scholar. What makes Hindman's essay especially noteworthy is her juxtaposition of research-based writing next to extended, informal, highly personal passages that describe her challenges of battling alcoholism. Sharing this personal writing in scholarly publication, in Hindman's view, presents a more complete picture and may promote change.

Summary

As this section suggests, practitioners of social justice writing attempt to increase awareness of the social exploitation of politically marginalized groups. Students are encouraged to recognize and to question social norms that favor some groups over others. The study of rhetoric promotes learning more about social realities, not so much to use writing as a tool for learning other disciplinary knowledge. Personal writing may be inadequate to achieve these social goals, as writers need to reflect upon more than their personal experience. They may need to explore interactions of several social variables in a dialectical process. An important goal is to help writers gain control of both their writing and their lives. Vastly different visions about the characteristics of

college-level writing can have implications in the classroom about how writing gets taught. In addition, the different visions may affect how students are assessed and placed into writing courses.

Practical Implications

Writing for Social Capital

It is important to point out that, regardless of intention, the accepted teaching of college-level writing carries with it important social justice implications, because in order to become a full-time faculty member at a community college, one must demonstrate commitment to values of the full-time colleagues, especially those on the hiring committee. The importance of this social process is explained by Bourdieu's (1984b) theory of social capital. Bourdieu observes that within the context of higher education, those who would adopt the norms of the elite would, over time, rise through promotion to the social level of the elite.

Pierre Bourdieu's theories about the development, preservation, and distribution of social capital are relevant. As people aspire to have better careers and social positions, they must learn how to become contributing elements within the established social order. Bourdieu (1984a) argues that learning these informal, nuanced rules is essential for social advancement.

Social differences in achievement among academics are reflected in many ways. According to Bourdieu (1984b), differences in social mobility within the academic system are even reflected in the kinds of writing preferred by academics: "[T]hus we see, for instance, that the distribution of works according to their degree of conformity

to academic norms corresponds to the distribution of their authors according to their possession of specifically academic power” (p. xviii).

Bourdieu’s insights have utility for understanding the situation in an American community college. When students arrive on college campuses speaking and writing dialects of English other than standard American academic English, they become targets of despair and repair. Compositionists, operating from an imagined sense of an ideal form of monolingual English, may attempt to correct different forms; this places some students into the category of Basic or ESL writer, which may be another way of labeling someone as an outsider. Write Horner and Trimbur (2002):

Basic writers have commonly been described as immigrants and foreigners to the academy, those whose right to be there is suspect and whose presence is often seen as a threat to the culture, economy, and physical environment of the academy. (p. 609)

Ironically, the teaching of writing to help others to become assimilated into the academy is not esteemed by members of the academy and by those who fund it. According to Sullivan (2006), political leaders are hesitant to support funding for remedial courses in higher education institutions. Blau (2006) points out that California colleges and universities are attempting to push all remedial writing courses down to the community college level.

Writing Against Failure

Sadly, writing students in community colleges struggle to survive academically within institutions that, ostensibly, exist to empower them to succeed. Within

community colleges, students—many of whom come from working-class backgrounds—struggle especially hard to develop academic identities (Horner & Trimbur, 2002; Kill, 2006). Community college students may be attending classes for largely instrumental reasons, trying to begin new careers to help their families become better-off financially (Ferretti, 2001). Because of their working-class backgrounds, they may feel uncomfortable with academic culture and language (Seitz, 2004). Working-class vocabulary, accent, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and interests may conflict with the values of a college-level writing class. Community college students may sense, intuitively, that the standards of linguistic competence used to judge them are political and social constructs resulting in privileges for certain cultural groups (Horner & Trimbur, 2002). What is more, community college writing students may resist efforts to assimilate easily into academic culture and to learn conventions of academic communication; for them, loyalty to their peer groups may be more important than changing to please the expectations of a compositionist (Dubson, 2006). This, in turn, places pressure upon compositionists. How far can they push these students to conform to idealized standards of good writing? As Layton (2005) implies, this tension can become much more than an academic exercise, because sometimes the physical safety of the compositionist can be on the line: “The conflicts of learning—coupled with broken cars, empty wallets, and sickness—sometimes push people beyond self-control” (p. 35).

In response to this injustice, some propose that compositionists resist more traditional assumptions about the nature of college-level writing. In this regard, consider

first the source of the problem, the nature and implications of the commodification or business model of college-level writing (Gunner, 2006; Haight, 2001). When writing is viewed as a commodity, it is much like a product: something to be isolated, prescribed, replicated, and tested. Rather than to emerge from the needs of the writer, it is produced outside of him or her and never becomes a real part of his or her life. Under this paradigm, teaching becomes a process of “boxing and shipping” learning in an assembly-line process (Gunner, 2006, p. 113). Students read from nationally marketed textbooks, they attend classes with uniform objectives, they complete a prescribed set of assignments, and they are assessed by faculty members using a standardized rubric. More often the goal of this model of writing is to serve corporate interests and not the interests of individual students. Addressing the corporate nature of much current college-level writing instruction, Dubson (2006) claims, “Too often the goal is to get the students in, get their tuition dollars, and then let academic Darwinism take over” (p. 107).

Herndl and Bauer (2003) describe confrontational rhetoric as an alternative type of college-level writing. A rhetoric of protest, it rejects the commodification assumptions about the relationship between the writer and his or her writing. It is not intended to prepare students to fit into the corporate world. Students learn to develop new discursive styles of communication as they learn to argue for and work toward radical social change. The idea here is that the rhetoric they produce leads to praxis and social action.

Writing for Assessment

Differences of opinion among compositionists about what college-level writing is and how it should be taught can also have an impact upon how student writing is assessed. The issue here is straightforward: in order to have valid assessment of college-level writing, there needs to be an accepted construct about what constitutes college-level writing, and this is where the situation becomes tricky.

What might count as a valid assessment of college-level writing? Our understanding of the nature of validity has recently changed. Traditional understandings of validity divided this concept into three important, independent segments: content, criterion, and construct (Messick, 1987, 1988, 1989). Content validity describes expert judgments about the relevance of test content with the domain of a targeted behavior. In contrast, criterion validity describes the attempt to correlate a score on one assessment as evidence to support the usefulness of another assessment's score. Construct validity refers to the application of evidence of any sort to understand the meaning of test scores. The problem with dividing validity into three parts is the resulting distortion of our understanding about how the three parts work together as one because, as Messick (1989) points out, the three segments of validity often share the same evidence.

More recently, validity is understood to be a unified concept, subsuming the three segments that were previously thought to be independent (Kane, 2010, 2011; Messick, 1987, 1988, 1989). Current theory emphasizes interpretations of scores, not the scores or tests themselves, as the source of validity. Modern validity theory also

includes the social implications resulting from assessment. Messick (1989) describes the complexity of this more robust understanding of validity as a unified concept:

Thus the key issues of test validity are the meaning, relevance, and utility of scores, the import or value implications of scores as a basis for action, and the functional worth of scores in terms of the social consequences of their use. (p. 5)

An important social consequence of testing includes issues of fairness for test takers. Writes Kane (2010), “Validity and fairness are closely related” (181). Kane (2010) now distinguishes between interpretative arguments and validation arguments. He claims that validation arguments begin with a clear statement about what is to be tested that lead to evaluations of test scores. Interpretive arguments focus more on the reasoning about conclusions resulting from test performances. Assessments need to adequately represent the performances of groups of people with regard to a particular construct; otherwise, issues of fairness arise.

Writing for an Uncertain Construct

When assessing college-level writing, how can we be certain that we are fair when the underlying construct is hotly contested? Messick (1994), writing in the context of general education, offers a potential solution. He recommends offering students taking assessments opportunities to respond to items with different contextual features. Messick (1994) reasons, “Indeed, contextual features that engage and motivate one student and facilitate his or her effective task performance may alienate and confuse another student and bias or distort task performance” (p. 19). The cultural contexts within higher education are gradually shifting. Although not writing about assessment

per se, Bizzell (1999) advocates for more tolerance of different genres of college-level writing to reflect the changes coming from a more diverse academic population: “With the diverse population, slowly but surely, come diverse discourses from people’s various home communities” (p. 11). Changes in traditional academic discourse include what Bizzell (1999) calls hybrid discourses, which often include these non-traditional traits: embracing subjectivity, including personal experience, showing emotion, including non-Western references, writing in informal style, using wry humor, and reaching the main point indirectly.

Attempts have been made to try to identify perceptions of essential features underlying the general construct of college-level writing. According to an influential study by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) that included interviews of 14 faculty members at George Mason University, faculty members, at least at the university level, tend to perceive writing as having three important characteristics:

1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer (s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.
2. The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception.
3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response. (pp. 5-7)

Although Thaiss and Zawacki offer these three observations as generalizable traits of college-level writing across contexts, Bizzell’s interpretation of hybrid discourses presents a challenge. For example, Bizzell suggests that humor and emotion are qualities of hybrid discourse within the academy but, as just noted above, Thaiss and

Zawacki argue that the college-level writer appeals to a reader who is coolly rational, and in this context reason dominates over emotion.

Summary

This section examined how the way in which college-level writing is delivered has social justice implications. Students who struggle to learn how to write within the academy are developing social capital to enter a new professional environment. For community college students, many of whom come from working-class families, the challenge to learn how to develop social capital through college-level writing can be especially difficult. What is more, assessment of skill in college-level writing is based upon what may be perceived to be a faulty, ill-defined construct. Hence, to promote fairness, it is necessary to have greater understanding of what college-level writing may be, including within the community college context. As the next section of this chapter discusses, what is missing from the literature is an in-depth exploration of how faculty members in community colleges perceive the essence of college-level writing.

Uniqueness of Community College Context

George Mason University Study

The important study by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) about perceptions of the nature of college-level writing helps to understand the context at George Mason University (GMU), but are the findings as generalizable as the authors suggest? GMU is not a typical American college or university. Located in Virginia, it is actually in a suburb of Washington DC, our nation's capitol. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) describe this region to be in the "fastest-growing, most diverse, and affluent part of the state" (p. 27). Thaiss

and Zawacki (2006) also describe GMU as “one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse universities in the country, with more than 25 percent of students nonnative speakers of English, a rich mix from around the globe (more than 100 language backgrounds represented)” (p. 27). On top of this, the authors point out that GMU, a Carnegie II Research institution, offers “60 bachelor’s degrees, 62 master’s degrees, 16 doctoral degrees, and one professional degree in law” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 27). Within this context, the 14 faculty members who were interviewed by Thaiss and Zawacki about the nature of college-level writing were a noteworthy group. Observe Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) about their selection of informants, “We gave priority to experienced writers who had achieved the scholarly success of tenure at the university, knowing that they had made decisions about their work based on expectations for tenuring in a research university” (p. 27).

While it would be reasonable to conclude that findings from the study by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) would be generalizable to the social contexts of other universities of similar size and mission, could the same be said about the situations in different kinds of academic institutions, such as community colleges? In other words, would a small group of faculty members from a community college perceive college-level writing in the same way as the 14 faculty members selected by Thaiss and Zawacki at GMU? Why might the perceptions be different? Why would this be important for our understanding of how college-level writing is taught and assessed? Before exploring in more detail through direct comparison about what we know concerning the perceptions of teaching of college-level writing in community colleges, including articles published in the journal

entitled *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, I think that it is appropriate to provide some historical context about the origins and unique missions of community colleges.

Characteristics of Community Colleges

Community colleges are very different from four-year academic institutions. In fact, the rise of the community college is a recent phenomenon (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Prior to the 1940s, two-year institutions of higher learning were known as junior colleges. As this name implies, they were responsible for preparing students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities for the completion of the baccalaureate. Beginning in the 1960s, many two-year colleges began to expand their missions, to include not only transfer functions to four-year institutions, but also to add new missions, such as occupational education, continuing education, developmental education, and community service. The community college mission is in contrast to the general mission of many four-year institutions, often defined as teaching undergraduates and conducting scholarly inquiry. There are now about 1,000 community colleges in the United States. As reported by the Carnegie Foundation (2010), community colleges range in size from the very small, with full-time equivalent enrollments of fewer than 2,000 students, to those with 40,000 or more.

Community college students are, as a group, different from their counterparts in four-year institutions. As reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012), 77 percent of students at four-year colleges attend full time, but only about 40 percent of community college students attend full time. There are good reasons why community college students tend to be part-time students. Roughly 25 percent of

community college students have one or more dependents, and about 30 percent are from the lowest economic quartile. Approximately 40 percent of all college students require remedial work in academic subjects; however, the percentage for community college students is much higher, at 58 percent (Fulton, 2012). For some community colleges, the percentage of students needing remediation can approach 90 percent (Scott-Clayton & Ridriguez, 2012). The plight of many community college students is summarized well by Cohen, Brawer and Kisker (2014):

Unlike full-time students at residential, four-year universities, whose lives may revolve around classes, peers, and social events, community college students often struggle to fit required courses, tutoring, and other educational activities into schedules constrained by part- or full-time jobs, family commitments, child-rearing responsibilities, long commutes, or other obligations. (p. 53)

Characteristics of Community College Faculty

Differences in missions and students distinguish community colleges from four-year institutions, but the differences do not stop there. The characteristics of faculty are different as well. Whereas an earned doctorate is often a minimal condition for full-time employment as a faculty member at a four-year institution, this is not the case at community colleges, where only about 19 percent of faculty members hold a doctorate (Cataldi, Bradburn, Fahimi & Zimbler, 2005). Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) point out that community college faculty members, in contrast to their four-year peers, tend to hold master's degrees as the highest degree, tend not to conduct research, tend not to publish, tend to spend more of their work time teaching, and tend to work as part-time

employees. The heavy reliance upon part-time faculty in community colleges is especially noteworthy. In public four-year institutions, about 66 percent of faculty are employed full time, but in community colleges this number drops to 30 percent (NCES, 2012). Research by Outcalt (2002) shows that part-time faculty at community colleges tend to be less engaged at their institutions and in their professions. Part-time faculty are less likely to team teach with colleagues, to receive teaching awards, to organize extracurricular activities for students, to travel to professional conferences, and to read professional journals.

To make matters worse, within community colleges, there is also a rigid, exploitive hierarchy among faculty members (Worthen, 2001). Adjunct faculty members, who are the largest number of faculty members, labor at the bottom of the hierarchy. They lack tenure, retirement benefits, health benefits, and other forms of institutional support. They teach at the whims of their department administrators. To keep their jobs, they often are reluctant to press pedagogical concerns, to risk the complaints of students by awarding low grades, and they are frequently excluded from participating in college governance committees. Not surprisingly, their attrition rate can be as high as 50 percent within the first two years of being hired.

Just as college-level writing is a contested concept, there is plenty of controversy surrounding those who labor to teach it. Locally or nationally, the teaching of college-level writing is not a prestigious line of work within higher education. As Dubson (2006) points out, first-year composition courses within four-year institutions are usually handed off to the most vulnerable, least powerful members of the academic

community: adjunct faculty members, instructors, and teaching assistants. Within community colleges, the problem may be even more acute, as community college faculty members, who labor under heavy workloads, often do not have the time to publish in their fields, including in composition (Power-Stubbs & Sommers, 2001; Reynolds, 2005; Tinberg, 2005). In addition, community college faculty members often lack specialized, research-based graduate degrees, such as the PhD, making it more difficult for them to publish academic papers (Tinberg, 1997). Community college faculty members may feel alienated from their own academic fields, and they may feel disrespected by their colleagues who teach in four-year institutions. Declares Tinberg (1997): “We are simply not taken seriously as academics—that is, as scholars or researchers. In their [university professors’] eyes, our work has little to do with the life of the mind” (p. 71).

On the brighter side, community college faculty members, including those who teach college-level writing, often claim to be experts in teaching (Reynolds, 2005; Tinberg, 1997; Tinberg, 2005). Because of the comprehensive mission of the community college to teach all members of the community within an open-admissions framework, community college faculty members experience tremendous diversity within their classrooms. To handle their mission, they must learn how to teach students of various demographic backgrounds, how to apply various forms of technology to enhance learning, how to develop support networks with colleagues in other disciplines across campus, and how to teach students who come to college academically ill-prepared.

The differences between community colleges and four-year institutions are great enough that one could claim that going into community college teaching may be viewed as a very different career path from going into four-year college or university teaching. Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) reflect this sentiment about community college faculty members:

“And as a group, faculty members no longer look to the universities for their ideas on curriculum and instruction, nor do they see the community colleges only as stations on their way to university careers” (p. 107).

Summary

In this section, I identified several relevant aspects of community colleges, which distinguish them from their four-year counterparts in higher education. Community colleges are tasked with providing a wide range of educational services to populations that are less-prepared to succeed academically. In addition, community colleges struggle to provide services with limited resources. Since at least the 1960s, community colleges have had comprehensive missions, to provide students with transfer opportunities, occupational education, and community service. Most community college students attend part time and 30 percent are from the lowest economic quartile. Those who teach at community colleges are often part-time faculty who struggle with low pay and few benefits to earn a living. In the next section, I will discuss what we currently know about the beliefs of community college faculty regarding the characteristics of college-level writing and how it needs to be taught.

Perceptions of College-Level Writing in Community Colleges

Perceptions of English Faculty

As my anecdote in the beginning of Chapter One suggests, it would be unfortunate to assume that faculty members of college-level writing, at least at the community college, agree about the characteristics of what they teach. White (2006) observes:

The term *college-level writing* is meaningless in itself, ignoring as it does the enormous variety of institutions, rhetorical situations, levels of education, and fields of study of college students. Personal definitions tell us about the person defining the term, not the term itself, and most institutional statements are too general to be useful. (266)

Some argue that the best way to define the concept of college-level writing is to do it locally (Davies, 2006; Harris, 2006), perhaps at the college or the department level (Gentile, 2006; White, 2006). However, Gentile (2006) warns that even at the department level, this process of defining college-level writing can be very complex, as students, faculty members, course materials, and standardized placement tests may operate under different assumptions. This problem may be exacerbated by the arrival of new faculty members within the department, who may bring with them even a greater variety of perceptions about the nature of college-level writing (Gentile, 2006).

Perceptions of Faculty from Various Disciplines

Interpreting the meaning of college-level writing becomes more complicated when the views of colleagues beyond English departments are considered. Some colleagues view the function of English composition courses to teach students how to

correct mistakes, how to produce error-free writing (Schorn, 2006), suggesting that composition courses are remedial. In other cases, colleagues who teach content courses may place more emphasis upon the development of creative ideas in papers and place less concern upon mechanical correctness (Davies, 2006). Regardless of the emphasis, there appears to be a perception that composition instruction is somehow a less-prestigious activity in higher education. Observes Schorn (2006), “There does still persist a sense among the disciplines that students *progress* from writing English papers to writing lab reports or business presentations” (p. 334). The types of writing assignments favored by colleagues outside of English departments may include those that compositionists may not cover in their own classes, which may increase divisions between English departments and other departments across campus. Assignments privileged among other departments may include lab reports, research reports, essay exams, case studies, journal entries, article summaries, and the like (Gentile, 2006). Still others recommend that compositionists should prepare students for the kinds of writing that they will need to do after they graduate from college; these assignments would include work-related documents, such as proposals, reports, memos, resumes, and speeches (Knodt, 2006).

While it may be tempting for compositionists to dismiss the opinions of colleagues in other departments about how to teach college-level writing, students still need to learn how to write effectively for faculty members in other disciplines. This responsibility implies that compositionists become aware, in a non-judgmental way, of what colleagues in other disciplines perceive good college-level writing to be (Schorn,

2006). Addressing this responsibility, Schorn (2006) writes, “We serve these students better when we know the full trajectory of their writing development in college, rather than just the stages that we guide them through” (p. 336). By communicating with colleagues outside of the English department, Schorn points out that we also have the opportunity to teach them about what we do in our classes, which may help to elevate our own voice within the academy. One potential vehicle for promoting heightened cooperation and mutual understanding among diverse colleagues about how to teach college-level writing is to implement Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) programs (Knodt, 2006; Stout, 2005). WAC programs may be very helpful in promoting a culture of writing across campus by supporting faculty members in various departments to include writing assignments in their courses. If implemented, this would encourage students to learn how to draft a wider range of documents and would support writing as a means of learning content material. Unfortunately, WAC programs may become highly controversial, as implementing them may lead to the removal of undergraduate composition courses from English departments and place the teaching of writing in the hands of those who have a limited understanding of how to teach it.

Trends in Community College Research

Much more needs to be done to improve thoughtful communication about perceptions of what college-level writing means and how to teach it, especially within the context of community colleges. Faculty members who teach at community colleges may conduct research and publish works in their fields. However, unlike their peers in four-year institutions, community college faculty members are usually not expected to

conduct research or to publish articles as a part of their normal work. Consequently, what we know about academic issues pertaining to community colleges is often based upon research conducted by faculty members who work at four-year institutions: “Except for the college-based institutional research officers, nearly all those who study community colleges are affiliated with universities or federal or state agencies” (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014, p. 361). Yet as Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) point out, very few faculty members at four-year institutions even focus their research efforts on issues pertaining to community colleges.

Although some studies are conducted by community college faculty members who are completing graduate degrees, the quality of the research may not be very good and, therefore, may not improve our understandings about academic issues pertaining to community colleges. Many of these studies, conducted by graduate students in the field of education, may select research methodologies and methods of data analysis that are inappropriate for the context in which they are conducting their research. Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) elaborate upon this problem in the following passage:

A limitation to these studies is that to legitimize education as a profession and education departments as worthy of status in graduate schools the professors must obey the university imperative to emulate scientific methods. Accordingly, their studies and those of their students typically display a strained connection to theory and often employ high-powered statistical analyses of soft data. (p. 361)

My own investigation of published scholarship about the perceptions of community college faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing tends to confirm the observations of Cohen, Brawer and Kisker (2014) about community college scholarship in general: not much is available and, what is more, what is available is often of limited value. I reached this conclusion after searching for systematic studies published over the last 10 years that attempt to identify the perceptions of community college faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing. The search engines that I used included *Academic Onefile*, *Academic Search Complete*, *Education Research Complete*, *Google Scholar*, *JSTOR*, and *Proquest Dissertations and Theses*. I also searched online for books about the same topic. In addition to this, I searched *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. Using all of these resources, I managed to find a few academic works that were written by or about community college faculty members concerning perceptions of the characteristics of college-level writing, but I was unable to find much that examined through systematic analysis the perceptions of community college faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing.

Much of what is published by community college faculty members about teaching English in a community college tends to fall within the category of papers that advocate for curriculum innovation based upon practical, successful classroom experience. A faculty member with an innovative lesson or course design may share this with the wider English-teaching community for everyone's professional benefit (Miller-Cochran, 2012; Sehulster, 2012; Sweeney, 2012; Tremmel, 2011). For example, Miller-Cochran (2012) describes how to implement a research-focused cross-cultural

composition course for both native and non-native speakers of English. Using this approach, students who might have otherwise been channeled into either ESL composition or mainstream composition courses work together in the same class, researching and writing from cross-cultural perspectives. Schulster (2012) describes the benefits of providing a forum for high school English teachers and community college writing faculty members to get together in regular meetings to discuss successful writing assignments and classroom pedagogy. Sweeney (2012) explains in detail an innovative assignment that encourages students to use Wikipedia in composition classes. Sweeney asks the students to research, draft, and post articles online in Wikipedia. According to Sweeney's experience, students can learn much from this assignment, such as how to research for articles, how to conduct audience analysis, how to prepare audience-appropriate discourse, and why information posted on Wikipedia needs to be interpreted cautiously. Tremmel (2011) offers advice, based upon historical research and personal classroom experience, about why teaching the five-paragraph essay provides a disservice to students. According to Tremmel, teaching students to draft the five-paragraph essay simplifies analysis of, and responses to, complex, nuanced academic issues. Although these kinds of anecdotal accounts are helpful in generating timely ideas for the improvement of instruction, they do not help us to understand through systematic study about the essence of college-level writing as perceived by community college faculty members.

Some researchers have attempted to discover information about perceptions of what community college faculty members think about the characteristics of college-

level writing, but these studies have been of limited value (Blaauw-Hara, 2014; Butsch, 2005; Carroll & Dunkelblau, 2011; Nielsen, 2002; Obler, 1985; Thonney, 2011). Blaauw-Hara (2014), in an attempt to understand more about how the skills taught in composition courses might help to prepare students in other courses, studied the writing prompts of 15 full-time and 17 part-time faculty teaching across disciplines. Blaauw-Hara discovered that many faculty members tend to incorporate in their assignments the need for students to use secondary research, summary research, subheadings, evaluation of sources, and expository description. The results of the study are of limited value for helping us to understand what community college faculty members perceive college-level writing to be, because the information was gleaned from the researcher's study of assignment prompts, without the benefit of interviews with faculty members to gather more information about why particular assignments were privileged over others or how individuals may interpret the meanings of key terms—like summary research—differently.

Butsch (2005) investigated the perceptions of 14 community college faculty about writing proficiency. Butsch invited 14 faculty to write for ten minutes to describe their construct of proficient college-level writing. Following this freewriting activity, each faculty member was presented with 18 samples of student papers and asked to rate their quality, based upon the criteria contained in the faculty member's free writing and also based upon the course descriptions of the college's English department. Butsch found that the faculty in his study, based upon his interpretations of their freewrites, agreed that style, grammar, audience and purpose were key indicators of academic

proficiency, but he also found that there was not a lot of agreement among faculty members about how to apply the criteria to give students a grade. In his study, he found that there was little agreement between workshop assessments about the quality of writing for a student and the grade that the same student actually received in a composition class. Unfortunately, this study has some very serious limitations. The faculty were required to write their perceptions in a 10-minute free write which, even Butsch (2005) acknowledges, was problematic: "As I noted earlier, only four respondents were comfortable with producing freewriting, even though I tried to make it clear that I wanted as many ideas as they could produce in ten minutes" (p. 32). Moreover, the amount of writing produced in the freewrites varied greatly, ranging between 18 to 265 words total. Butsch did not conduct interviews with faculty members to help them to explain or expand their perceptions of college-level writing.

Writing within an ESL context, Carroll and Dunkelblau (2011) administered a self-report survey to 23 community college faculty members in various disciplines to discover which kinds of writing assignments were most commonly required in courses with large numbers of ESL students. The results found that essays, summaries, and research papers were the most common types of assignments. However, the study did not explore in further detail what the defining characteristics would be of each of these assignments or why they might be popular. In addition, the researchers did not interview the faculty members to gain a deeper understanding about their perceptions of the essential nature of these assignments or to learn about other perceived characteristics of college-level writing.

Davis (2012) explored the perceptions of 11 community college faculty members about text messaging and its impact on college-level writing. Analyzing data from personal interviews, artifacts, and observations, Davis concluded that text speak was present in most students' writing and that most community college faculty members did not like it, considering it to be inappropriate for college-level writing. Davis, on the other hand, argued that text speak is a new form of literacy and probably deserves to be included as a component of what we now consider to be standard English. Although this study helps us to understand more about what many community college faculty members may think about the appropriateness of text speak in college-level writing, it did not examine in depth other possible perceptions of characteristics of college-level writing. Hence, the focus of this study was specific to text speak.

Nielsen (2002) examined the perceptions of students and faculty members about academic writing. In her study, Nielsen studied the perceptions of 10 high school and college students, plus four high school and college faculty. She used a wide range of qualitative data, including information from formal interviews, informal interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and personal reflections. For the purposes of my literature review, Nielsen's study has a serious limitation: she included only one community college faculty member as a participant, and that faculty member was herself. Hence, to articulate the perceptions of community college faculty members about proficient academic writing, she simply reported her own perceptions. In any case, she claimed that proficient writing included room for personal expression, for opportunities to connect with other people, for opportunities to learn how to apply

different modes to communicate ideas, for the need to adjust writing to match the needs of audience, and for the need to write as a process to achieve acceptable product.

Obler (1985) studied the writing requirements of community college faculty members within the context of writing across the curriculum programs. Obler surveyed 304 full-time community college faculty members about the kinds of writing that they required, and she followed up her survey with telephone interviews of 20 faculty members. By Obler's definition, a formal paper consisted of five or more pages in length, whereas an informal paper had fewer than five pages. Obler found an inverse relationship between the assignment of formal and informal papers. In her sample, 63.7 percent of all community college faculty members did not require formal papers; however, 63.5 percent did require informal papers. In contrast, 69 percent of English composition faculty members did require formal papers. As a whole, Obler (1985) discovered that among many of the community college faculty members included in her study, writing simply was not used much in the curriculum: "To some extent, writing was considered a frill like a field trip, but not something the system can really afford on a regular basis" (p. 142).

With regard to the topic of my dissertation, Obler's study is dated. Completed in 1985, it is nearly 30 years old. More importantly, it did not explore in detail what the faculty members thought about the defining characteristics of college-level writing. It divided writing into two major types, formal and informal, based upon required page numbers. Obler did not explore the faculty members' views about other features or

genres of college-level writing. Obler was more interested to discover the variables that might affect the amount and types of writing assigned. According to Obler, the minimal presence of writing in the community college curriculum may be attributed to a general lack of confidence and practice with regard to writing among many faculty members, especially those who teach in vocational, business, and physical education fields.

Meagher (1993) used qualitative research methodology, including elements of phenomenological interviewing, such as open-ended questioning, to study the perspectives on literacy of 12 community college faculty members and 12 community college students. Meagher studied documents, recorded observations, and conducted interviews to uncover perspectives about the importance of literacy in modern life and the ways in which literacy is useful. What Meagher (1993) found was that faculty and students both agreed upon the limiting potential of electronic technologies to encourage literacy: “Similarly, most of the participants seemed to convey the idea that the electronic media function as either adjuncts or hindrances to print literacy, rather than as potentially new ways of thinking of organizing information” (p. 271). More specific to college-level writing, Meagher found that faculty value writing that draws upon adequate support from acceptable, relevant, textual sources.

For my research purposes, there are some important limitations to Meagher’s (1993) study. Meagher did not focus on attempting to find out what community college faculty members perceive college-level writing to be. Rather, he examined their perceptions about literacy, which includes both reading and writing skills. Meagher’s qualitative study cannot be considered to be a true transcendental phenomenological

study because Meagher did not apply epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions. An important principle of transcendental phenomenological research is to try to understand a phenomenon from another's perception, to uncover the essence of the phenomenon, as perceived by others. Writes Moustakis (1994) of phenomenological research:

The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description about it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (p. 13)

In contrast, Meagher's (1993) study resembles more closely a naturalistic research study, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Meagher explored perceptions of community college faculty members and students about literacy, a more general concept, through interviews, documents, and field notes, which were analyzed for units and categories. What is more, Meagher included his own personal perspectives into the data analysis, to become like another informant. Observes Meagher (1993): "the inquirer has utilized knowledge beyond the interview data, knowledge that had been gained from this own reading, writing, and personal experience" (p. 105). Hence, much information that Meagher collected, and some conclusions that he drew, cannot be associated directly with his interviews of community college faculty members. Perhaps more importantly for my own research purposes, Meagher's (1993) study avoided going into much detail about the perceptions of characteristics of college-level writing. Instead, he focused data collection and data analysis on the improvement of literacy in

general, offering specific policy recommendations for the state legislature in Florida to promote better teaching, learning, and assessment of literacy.

Conclusion

What is needed in the field of composition studies is a systematic study of the perceptions of community college faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing. This study would gather information through interviews and apply principles of transcendental phenomenology to get at the perceptions of the essence of what college-level writing is, based upon the perceptions of a small group of community college faculty members. The result of this study would complement the work of Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), who systematically explored the perceptions of the characteristics of college-level writing at George Mason University. Viewed together, these studies would provide composition studies with a broader, more inclusive understanding about the perceptions of the nature of college-level writing for college faculty and students. Providing more detail about how and why transcendental phenomenology would be used to conduct this research is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

As I explained in Chapters One and Two, the focus of this dissertation research was to examine the perceptions of a small group of community college faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing within the context of a community college. In this chapter, I explain in detail why I selected a particular form of qualitative research, transcendental phenomenology, as the research method to explore those perceptions among community college faculty members.

Description of Method

Transcendental phenomenology shares much in common with contemporary qualitative research methodologies (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative methodologies tend to emphasize the study of objects or processes in their entirety, not as parts. These methods examine for meanings of experiences, not just physical measurements using objective instruments. Moreover, these methods rely upon first-person accounts of experience, as gathered from formal and informal interviews.

However, there is an important distinction between other qualitative research methodologies and transcendental phenomenology. In qualitative research traditions, the human researcher becomes the primary research instrument (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). Reliance upon human beings as research instruments provides an opportunity for potential bias to affect the collection, inclusion, and analysis of data. To correct for these potential distortions, qualitative researchers need to self-report their biases within studies and encourage readers to form their own

conclusions about the value of findings for a particular social context. Observes Maxwell (2005), "Explaining your possible biases and how you will deal with these is a key task of your research proposal" (p. 108). For their part, Lincoln and Guba (1985) appear to celebrate the presence of researcher bias in qualitative studies because, without it, many studies simply would not be conducted in the first place: "What is important to note here is that the inquirer's values not only implicitly affect selected aspects of the inquiry process but may in fact be the central driving force in the work" (p. 175). An important point that distinguishes transcendental phenomenology from other qualitative research traditions is an expectation that transcendental phenomenologists will be able to minimize sources of researcher bias by implementing principles of transcendental phenomenology throughout the study.

For the transcendental phenomenologist, the reduction of researcher bias is possible because, as Husserl (1970, 1950) points out, the mind and the body are separate entities. Yet, what we can rely upon for certainty is our own thought. Therefore, the mind can, through effort and practice, explore itself and the outside world. Claims Husserl (1970), "Ultimately, all genuine, and, in particular, all scientific knowledge, rests on inner evidence: as far as such evidence extends, the concept of knowledge extends also" (p. 61). Hence, we are not destined to think within the confines of our limiting experiences and prejudices. We can use the power of our imaginations to explore new insights, to push aside biases. As Moustakas (1994) explains, the intent is "to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and

hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 22).

The key to performing transcendental phenomenological research is to begin with the *epoche* process (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). The researcher needs to *bracket* or identify a question or doubt to be explored. Once a problem has been identified, the researcher may identify his or her own previous experiences, suppositions, and biases concerning the bracketed issue. As much as possible, all prior knowledge must be doubted, as the goal is to try to begin research with a fresh perspective. In *epoche*, the researcher strives to identify and cleanse his or her mind of biases that may prevent effective listening to the perceptions of others. As one might guess, this process requires patience, time, and commitment, and perhaps a good deal of meditation. However, the benefit of the trouble is to provide the researcher with a more open mind and a willingness to engage in the research without coloring the communication of informants or compromising the interpretation of data. Although Moustakas admits that the *epoche* may not be perfectly achieved, the quality of research will be much better as a result of attempting to implement this process.

The next step is for the researcher to engage in *phenomenological reduction* (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000).). According to Moustakis, after the interviews have been transcribed, the researcher reads transcripts multiple times, to understand the phenomenon—what it means—from the participants’ point of view. Within this major step, two forms of data collection occur. In *textural description*, the researcher brackets a phenomenon and records what is experienced with regard to

it. These experiences are also referred to as *noema*. Once the phenomenon has been thoroughly studied and the noema recorded in detail, the researcher has a textural description, which leads to the next part of this step, the *structural description*, also known as the *noesis*. The noesis describes the way in which the phenomenon has been experienced and this can only be understood after the noema has been established. Hence, the researcher observes the noema, reflects upon its meanings, and derives the noesis. Perceptions are followed by reflections, which lead to deeper understandings. An important process of phenomenological reduction is *horizontalization*, which describes opening up new horizons, or perspectives, each time we discover new possibilities, new insights, about the phenomenon of the study. Simply put, the more we study, the more we can understand about the phenomenon, and there is no limit to how much we may learn. In horizontalization, the researcher begins to identify topical statements in the transcripts and to list them for later analysis. During this process, each topical statement is assigned equal value, ensuring that the voices of participants are all heard. To create *clusters of meaning*, the researcher groups statements into themes or meaning units, trimming the list of statements by removing overlapping or repetitive ones. After the meaning units have been formed, the researcher can begin drafting an *individual textural description* of each participant's interview; this describes what is experienced by each participant and the meaning that he or she attaches to it. Once this has been completed for all individual participants, the data about individuals are integrated into a *composite textural description* for the group. This is a careful, time-consuming process. Nevertheless, time and other constraints may limit how long we can

study a particular phenomenon, which suggests that our understanding of it will always be limited and temporary. Cautions Moustakas (1994), “No horizon lasts indefinitely, regardless of wish, hope, or fear” (p. 95).

Imaginative variation is the third major step of transcendental phenomenological research (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). Here, the power of human imagination is used to think of new ways to view the phenomenon, outside of the researcher’s original perspective. The researcher may examine the phenomenon with different frames of reference, different polarities, different roles, and different functions. Possible themes to be considered in regard to how the phenomenon might affect participants could include universals such as time, place, relationships, intentions, etc. “Imaginative Variation enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through Phenomenological Reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).

In imaginative variation, the researcher develops all-important *structural descriptions*. What are structural descriptions? Perhaps the clearest way to understand them is to think of connecting patterns of dots on a sheet of white paper to create a coherent, meaningful picture. Structural descriptions not only include the associations established by textural descriptions, but also they provide understandings, messages, about why associations may happen. Explains Moustakas (1994), “The thrust is away from facts and measurable entities and toward meanings and essences” (p. 98).

The final step in the transcendental phenomenological research process is the *synthesis of meanings and essences* (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski,

2000). Here, textural and structural descriptions are synthesized into a statement that captures the essence of the entire phenomenon. Although the essence derived from this approach should be good, it would not be perfect, because our perceptions can never completely grasp the entirety of a phenomenon for all time. Explains Husserl (1970):

I can take no empirical determination as actually belonging to the object; I can only say that it is experienced under this determination. Even in thought I cannot hold fast to the determination in an absolutely identical way; I can never, in approaching the experienced object, say that the determination I experience now is absolutely the same as the one I have experienced. (p. 314)

As a result, transcendental phenomenologists still need to advance their hard-earned research findings with some tentativeness and humility.

I opted to apply transcendental phenomenological research methodology in my study of the perceptions of community college faculty members about the essence of college-level writing because this research methodology attempts to capture with a minimal amount of distortion their perceptions of the essence. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I explore the details of how the study unfolded.

Research Site

The site for this study was Prairie Community College (PCC) (a pseudonym) located in the central time zone of the United States. I taught at this college for several years, which meant that I had access to many people on campus, an advantage that others new to the college would not enjoy. PCC was a good representative of an

American community college. It was a suburban community college located adjacent to a metropolitan center in the heartland of the United States. Approximately 19,000 students attended PCC, with 68 percent of them attending part time. As with many other community colleges in the United States, the majority of PCC's students (60 percent) received financial aid and only a few (14 percent) continued to study in the institution until graduation. However, 28 percent transferred to another academic institution. As in community colleges elsewhere, the majority of faculty members taught part time (606), while about half as many (323) taught full time. These facts suggested that many of the students who attended PCC, like the students who attended community colleges elsewhere in the United States, were depending upon the community college as a tool for transfer. As with students enrolled in other community colleges, the students at PCC were more likely to be taught by part-time faculty.

Sample Description

Purposive sampling ensured that a variety of voices from across campus were included in the study and that the emergence of a perceived essence of college-level writing more adequately reflected what faculty members, both full-time and part-time, in academic divisions across campus thought. To learn more about the perceptions of my colleagues at PCC about college-level writing, I interviewed six colleagues and analyzed their comments using transcendental phenomenology as my research methodology. Three colleagues were English faculty members: Deseret, Karen, and Marcia. Three colleagues were from biology (Carol), economics (Brian), and mathematics (Nicole). All were full-time faculty members, except for Carol and Marcia,

who taught at PCC part-time. All six had at least ten years of teaching experience at PCC. All of them held master’s degrees in their disciplines. Karen and Brian also held doctoral degrees. In general, the demographics of the participants in my study appeared to reflect general trends among community college faculty nationwide (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Most of the faculty held master’s degrees and a few held doctorates. They included both full-time and part-time faculty. Furthermore, the proportion of men was lower.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

Name	Field	Employment Status	Experience at PCC	Education
Brian	Economics	Full Time	10+ years	PhD
Carol	Biology	Part Time	10+ years	MS
Deseret	English	Full Time	10+ years	MA
Karen	English	Full Time	10+ years	PhD
Marcia	English	Part Time	10+ years	MA
Nicole	Mathematics	Full Time	10+ years	MS

Interviews

Much has been written about the value of using informal, open-ended interview questions in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Nunan, 1992; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Perhaps Nunan (1992), writing in the context of conducting second-language acquisition research, expressed it best when he succinctly wrote: “While responses to closed questions are easier to collate and analyze, one often obtains more useful information from open questions. It is also likely that responses to open questions will more accurately reflect what the respondent

wants to say” (p. 143). This data collection approach matched well the intent of my study, which was to explore the perceptions of community college faculty members about the essence of college-level writing. I did not want to guide the participants toward a perceived essence that matched my own perceptions at the expense of accurately reporting theirs. Therefore, prior to interviews, I practiced the epoche process of transcendental phenomenology by recording my own perceptions about the essence of college-level writing and tried to look for opportunities to find other points of view among my participants. In keeping with guidelines of transcendental phenomenology, I encouraged participants to reflect about the characteristics of college-level writing in a relaxed, conversational atmosphere, one in which participants had freedom to express what they wanted to say about the topic without my interference. Moustakas (1994) recommends that the interviews begin with a social conversation, to create a relaxed atmosphere. This is followed by a general discussion of the phenomenon, to promote awareness and to consider impact. If helpful, the interviewer and the interviewee may briefly meditate about the phenomenon, before the interview begins. To keep the conversation flowing on topic, I invited participants to bring with them to the interviews samples of good and bad college-level writing, to provide some context for the discussions.

The more information that was gathered and analyzed, the clearer the phenomenon became. Observes Moustakas (1994), “Things become clearer as they are considered again and again” (p. 93). However, I recognized that conducting interviews and analyzing them to reach structural descriptions for the purpose of finding essence

about college-level writing was a life-long activity. For this to be practical, I needed to impose some time limits. I tried to conduct at least two hour-long interviews with each participant.

Research and Interview Questions

As I explained in Chapter One, three research questions guided the study. The information gathered from participants at PCC enabled me to compare the results gathered from PCC with the results gathered by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) from their faculty participants at GMU. The information gleaned from the interviews at PCC expanded our understanding of some community college faculty members about the perceptions of the essence of college-level writing because, for the first time, we had information systematically collected from faculty members and analyzed using principles of transcendental phenomenology. The three research questions were as follows:

1. How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe college-level writing? Do their descriptions reflect the descriptions of college-level writing presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) in their study at GMU?
2. How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe multiple discourses? What are they? Who uses them? Under which conditions? How might these conditions be similar to, and different from, the descriptions found by Thaiss and Zawacki in their study at GMU?
3. What do faculty members of different disciplines in this study at PCC describe as trends in college-level writing, according to their own individual perceptions?

There is a difference between a good research question and a good interview question. Maxwell (2005) explains, “Your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your interview questions are what you ask people in order to gain that understanding” (p. 92). In this study, because I used transcendental phenomenology as my qualitative research method, I needed to focus on asking participants informal, open-ended questions to get them reflecting on, and talking about, their perceptions about the nature of college-level writing. Asking informants open-ended questions is quite common in qualitative research. However, using transcendental phenomenology, as I prepared for the interviews, I needed to practice the epoche, which meant to engage in reflective meditation to identify my own internal sources of bias regarding the phenomenon, to describe my bias in writing, and to return to explore the phenomenon with renewed commitment to see it in a less-biased way. In other words, using transcendental phenomenology, the goal for the researcher is to strive to identify and to reduce personal bias at all stages of the study in order to understand better the world, the essence of a phenomenon, from another person’s perception. As Moustakas (1994) points out, the process is challenging, rhythmic: “This may take several sessions of clearing my mind until I am ready for an authentic encounter” (p. 89). Nevertheless, the trouble is worth it: “I am ready to perceive and know a phenomenon from its appearance and presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89).

The interviews with full-time faculty members Brian, Deseret, Karen and Nicole took place in their on-campus offices at PCC. I scheduled two one-hour appointments on separate days with each faculty member. The two one-hour interviews with adjunct

faculty members Carol and Marcia were scheduled on two separate days in my on-campus office at PCC. These arrangements provided privacy and convenience for the interviews. I asked participants to bring with them to the interview a sample of what they perceived to be good college-level writing. I also asked them to bring along a sample of what they perceived to be poor college-level writing. I asked them to describe their perceptions of the good piece of writing and to discuss why they admired it. Ideally, this was a piece of writing written by a student, but it could also have been a draft written by a colleague or by themselves. I informed the participants that I would not ask to see their samples of college-level writing that they might choose to bring to the interview sessions. However, I invited them to have the samples with them, if they wished, in case they wanted to refer to the samples during the interviews.

To enable systematic comparison of answers, I conducted the interviews by bringing with me a general guide of open-ended questions that were asked of all participants (Nunan, 1992; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). However, I conducted the interviews as conversations, not as formal question-and-answer sessions; this enabled me to explore ideas that emerged outside of the boundaries of the protocol questions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). To assist in the flow of the conversation, I also invited participants to bring with them to the interviews samples of writing that they perceived reflected or did not reflect college-level writing. Using this approach, the interviews were an active session, a social encounter, in which the participants and I had opportunities to explore meanings and issues within the contexts of the conversations. Holstein and Gubrium (2003) write, "From this perspective, interview participants are

practitioners of everyday life, constantly working to discern and designate the recognizable and orderly features of experience” (p. 73). What anchored this qualitative process within the tradition of transcendental phenomenology during the interviews was application of the epoche process, through which I attempted to identify and control personal bias to understand better the phenomenon from the participants’ point of view.

To complement the self-selected samples of college-level writing, I provided prior to each interview a copy of a published sample of college-level student writing found in a reference handbook that was assigned to students in our college’s writing classes (Craig, 2010). I selected this sample essay as an item for discussion because it was presented in our handbook as a positive example of good-quality, college-level student writing. The sample essay by Craig was entitled “Messaging and the Language of Youth Literacy.” Craig’s seven-page essay was a research-based essay drafted in MLA style, with in-text citations and a works cited page. The handbook and its contents had already been reviewed and approved by the curriculum committee of PCC’s English department.

The point of the interview process was to initiate an informal, open-ended conversation about the important qualities of college-level writing, as perceived by each faculty member. I asked participants to identify features about what they liked about each piece of writing and to explain why the features were important. This approach was in keeping with the advice offered by Moustakas (1994), who writes, “The

phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114).

Next, I invited the participants to describe the perceived characteristics of their most commonly used college-level writing assignments. I asked them to bring to the interview samples of some commonly used writing assignments. I did not ask to see copies of the assignments. I only suggested that participants bring the samples with them, to use as references during the interviews, if they wanted. I asked participants to explain the features of these assignments in terms of why they perceived these to reflect the construct of college-level writing. Then I asked them to reflect about other kinds of assignments that they had sometimes used, successfully and unsuccessfully, to teach their classes. I asked them to describe the features, strengths, and weaknesses of these assignments. Finally, I asked them to describe the features of writing assignments that they probably never wanted to use in their classes. What were the features of those assignments? Why were those assignments not appropriate?

I asked participants to reflect about how they perceived college-level writing to be in their classes and how it might be perceived differently in the classes of colleagues in the same discipline and in other disciplines.

The following interview questions, inspired by the categories of interview questions used by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) at GMU, were used to prime discussions with participants during the first one-hour interview session:

1. What is it that you like most and like least about your writing samples of college-level writing?

2. What is it that you like most and like least about my writing sample of college-level writing?
3. How do you define college-level writing in your discipline?
4. What kinds of college-level writing do you encounter most often?
5. What kinds of college-level writing do you encounter least often?
6. How do you use college-level writing in your assignments for students?
7. What limits, if any, do you place on what can be accepted as college-level writing from students?
8. How do you encounter college-level writing in areas of your work beyond teaching students? In general? In your discipline? In PCC?
9. How do you define college-level writing? In general? In your discipline? In PCC?

The following interview questions, also inspired by the categories of interview questions used by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) at GMU, were used to prime discussions with participants during the second one-hour interview session:

1. Since our last interview session, have you thought of any additional points about college-level writing that you would like to share?
2. Why do you like the sample of alternate discourse of college-level writing that you have brought to your interview?
3. During your career, have you noticed any changes in what might be considered acceptable college-level writing in general? In your discipline? In PCC?
4. Do you encourage students in your classes to write in alternate discourses? If not, why not? If so, how?

5. At what point might an alternate discourse no longer be considered college-level writing? In general? In your discipline?
6. Do you think that it is more important to learn to write according to prescribed rules and conventions than it is to challenge those rules and conventions? In general? In your discipline? In PCC?
7. Are there some rules and conventions of college-level writing that are best challenged or not challenged? In general? In your discipline? In PCC?
8. Are there any kinds of writing not currently considered to be college-level writing that may be considered to be college-level writing in, say, 10 or 15 years from now? In general? In your discipline? What might account for these changes? Alternatively, if no changes are expected, what might account for the lack of change?

Transcriptions and Coding

The interviews were recorded electronically to ensure the accuracy of data collection. Shortly after each electronic recording session, I listened to the complete interview several times to become familiar with the content. I then identified parts of the interview that were relevant to the content of this research project. Statements from participants about college-level writing were deemed to be relevant; statements about personal problems, family activities, hobbies, travel plans, and the like, were deemed to be irrelevant to the focus of this research effort. Once I had identified within the audio recordings those parts that were relevant to my research questions, I began the transcription process. I applied what Oliver, Serovich and Mason (2005) describe as

a denaturalized approach toward transcription: I transcribed the statements of participants, focusing on capturing the meanings of what they were attempting to communicate. I did not attempt to create a naturalized transcript, as capturing linguistic forms in detail was not important in this research effort. I drafted the transcripts in what Lapadat (2000) describes as “standard orthography and punctuation,” which can be very valuable, as it omits “dysfluencies and false starts, promotes ease of reading and member checking” (p. 206). I wanted to present the quoted perceptions of my participants in a positive, respectful manner, so I did not want to include passages attributed to them that would be full of repetitions, false starts, long pauses, and obvious grammatical errors. Sacrificing linguistic accuracy to emphasize recording of meaning seemed appropriate to me, given the focus of this research effort, which was to examine perceptions of a few faculty members at PCC about the essence of college-level writing. Observes Lapadat (2005), “if the researcher is interested in the content of an interviewee’s remarks, it might not make sense to do a narrow transcription inclusive of overlaps, pause length, and so on” (p. 214). To supplement electronic recordings, I wrote handwritten field notes of observations about the sessions, filling in more detail to them immediately after the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

Developing good textural descriptions is a crucial step in transcendental phenomenological research. To accomplish this, I attempted to adhere to best practices of research using transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). I first bracketed my own experience about this topic, to identify and to reduce the influence of my own

perceptions in my analysis of the data. I often meditated for 30 minutes or more to try to clear my mind of biases before each session in which I studied the transcripts. I spent between 10 to 20 hours each week over a three-month period studying the transcripts, writing comments in the margins of pages of transcripts, pulling out key phrases and writing or pasting them onto index cards and sheets of paper, which I later grouped into categories by themes. My goal was not just to study the data to look for connections, but to struggle to absorb the data into my consciousness, to become united with it. This principle is very important in transcendental phenomenology, as explained by Moustakas (1994): “The object that appears in consciousness mingles with the object in nature so that a meaning is created, and knowledge is extended” (p. 27).

To horizontalize the data, or to organize information into categories, I found it helpful to apply the qualitative coding procedures suggested by Creswell (2009). I prepared the data for analysis by transcribing interviews, then I studied the data, to gain a sense of the general direction. I applied a coding process suitable for my research situation. Using scissors, I cut out passages from printed copies of the transcripts and grouped passages by theme under each research question. From each group of data arranged by research question, I listed topics that emerged during my readings. I returned to the interview data for each research question, reading through the groupings of paper, looking for more ideas for topics. After I had read through the data for each research question several times and had cross-checked the viability of my topics for each question, I grouped related topics into larger categories. Once my categories were clear and could account for all of my topics and pieces of information

from the interviews, I read through copies of the transcripts again, writing in the margins of the pages the names of the categories next to the relevant interview data. At the end of this process, I had a thematic structure for the interview data and an index of relevant material to quote from, as needed for the reporting of results.

Trustworthiness

I took precautions to protect the credibility of the study and its findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). I kept in mind these important questions: Were the results of a study believable, credible? Would a reasonable person presented with the data agree with the study's interpretations and findings? These questions were associated with the concept of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Maxwell (2005) refers to this as "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 106). For a study to be taken seriously, to be worthy of our trust, it needed to include steps to strengthen its credibility as much as possible. I used member checks as opportunities to share preliminary findings and interpretations of data with participants in order to hear from them about suggestions of how to accurately reflect their realities within the data. After all of the interviews and transcriptions of interviews were completed, I met with each participant individually to review his or her transcript. I invited each participant to amend, delete or add information to the transcript. Engaging in the study over an extended period of time was another practice that supported credibility. I conducted all of the interviews over an academic semester. Next, a good, credible study of interview data needed to include rich data sources, such as verbatim transcripts of interviews. For

this study, I recorded electronically and transcribed relevant parts of the interviews. As Lincoln and Guba suggest, if the study is trustworthy and credible, it should also have good transferability, as readers can determine for themselves, based upon the study's situation, whether or not its results apply to their own social situations. Throughout the study, I applied to the best of my ability principles of transcendental phenomenology to identify, to code, and to analyze data responsibly.

Protection of Participants

I followed relevant, standard procedures for the study of human subjects (Eyde, 2000; Fishman, 2000; Folkman, 2000). I submitted my proposal to the Institutional Review Boards of Indiana University of Pennsylvania and Prairie Community College for approval. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were asked to sign a consent form before the interviews began. I described to subjects the purpose of the study, its procedures, its potential risks, and its procedures to protect confidentiality. I reassured subjects that they were free to discontinue their participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

The only potential threat that I could foresee about the welfare of participants in this study might involve potential violation of confidentiality. Because I asked faculty members (some of whom were adjunct faculty members) in private interviews about their perceptions concerning college-level writing and its teaching, it was possible that their candid answers to my questions could have reflected negatively upon them later on, should their identities be linked to their responses. Therefore, unlike Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), I did not share the names or otherwise reveal the identities of those

who participated in this study. I was vigilant in protecting the identities of participants. I immediately transcribed relevant parts of their sessions and removed their names and other identifying information from the transcripts. I stored in my home in a steel file cabinet with a mechanical lock, not in my office at the college, all recordings, transcripts, field notes, and other artifacts associated with this study. Each participant's records were coded with a pseudonym and any demographic information that was unnecessary for the purposes of this study was removed from the records. I did not share information about participants with third parties through electronic means, such as email, social web sites, and the like. I did not ask participants to respond to questions via electronic means, such as email. All personal interviews were conducted privately, in face-to-face meetings.

In our college, full-time faculty members volunteered to observe classes taught by adjunct faculty members and to write evaluations that became a part of the adjunct colleague's summative evaluation process. I was not a part of this evaluation process and had no intention of joining it; therefore, this greatly reduced opportunities for the perception that adjuncts might have had of me being a potential threat. In addition, it is also important to point out that prior to my advancement to full-time status, I taught at PCC as an adjunct faculty member, and I had been careful to maintain many trusting, collegial relationships among adjunct colleagues. Likewise, I intended to keep the identities of participants confidential, so they did not feel pressured to conceal their views from me during personal interviews. Therefore, it was not a problem for me to find participants willing to share openly their views in this study.

In the next section, I introduce the *epoche*, which is the first important step in the transcendental phenomenological research process. In epoche, the researcher attempts to purge oneself of bias about the phenomenon to be discussed by presenting through bracketing his or her experience. Writes Moustakas (1994), “In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure transcendental ego” (p. 33). Once the researcher’s personal experience with the phenomenon has been presented, the reader may be on the lookout for potential bias that may influence the researcher’s interpretations of findings. For these reasons, I believe that reporting epoche here, at the end of Chapter Three, serves as a good transition for the reporting of research findings in Chapter Four.

Epoche

Transcendental phenomenology, as with other qualitative research traditions, enables researchers to explore the perceptions of participants. What may distinguish researchers who apply transcendental phenomenology from those who use other forms of qualitative research interviewing is the goal of attempting to find the perceived essence, the perceived pure quality, of a phenomenon, from another person’s point of view (Moustakas, 1994). For this to be achieved, the researcher must attempt to identify and to limit the influence of one’s own personal bias upon interpretation of phenomenological data. Rolfe (2008) explains, “The suspension of experiential knowledge therefore, results in a reduction down to the ‘pure phenomenon’ or

‘absolute data’ of an experience that somehow contains the intrinsic character or essence of the thing in question” (p. 271).

A researcher using transcendental phenomenology to understand the perceptions of others about a phenomenon must first begin by identifying his or her own lens or bias. This requires the reporting of relevant personal experience, so that this information, as much as possible, may be identified and bracketed to prevent it from influencing data collection and analysis. In other words, the researcher uncovers her lens and does her best to prevent it from skewing interpretation of data. In the next section, I perform the bracketing by describing my own personal experience with writing and how this has informed my perceptions of what constitutes college-level writing and how it needs to be taught. The purpose of the bracketing section is to hold myself as researcher accountable for an honest interpretation of the data, to disclose my own lenses that may influence subsequent interpretations of data. When looking for ways to interpret data responsibly, I need to search consciously beyond the lenses of my own personal experience. Bracketing encourages honesty, thoroughness, and responsibility of analysis.

To begin the bracketing process, I would point out that I have been teaching college-level writing since the fall of 1985, when I began my career as a teaching assistant in the English department at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. I taught one or two sections of Freshman Writing each semester while I worked on a Master of Arts in English. Since then, I have taught at several other academic institutions, including universities in Taiwan and community colleges in the

United States. However, the earliest, formative experiences that influenced me as a writing teacher began not when I studied as a graduate student in English, but when I lived as a small boy on a dairy farm in Colorado.

Shortly after my parents divorced, before my first birthday, my mother dropped me off at my maternal grandparents' dairy farm to be raised until I was old enough to attend school. My grandparents raised me until I was five years old. The earliest lessons I learned from watching my grandparents work on their farm were about the beauty of manual labor. My grandfather had to milk, feed, and clean up after 100 cows, every day. He had leathery skin, a muscular build, and perpetual body odor. My grandmother tended the vegetable garden and cooked three meals a day, from scratch. When my mother was financially able, she brought me with her to live in a small, one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, which I hated. I was not prepared for the cultural shock of living with her, of living in Los Angeles, and of going to school. As a result, I was frequently sick and missed many days of school. This resulted in my falling behind my classmates, which caused me to dislike school even more. Real life, for me, meant living with my grandparents on their dairy farm and I often begged my mother, without success, to send me back to live with them. My mother remarried two more times and I struggled to live in her turbulent world. I became withdrawn at home and at school, choosing to live in a fantasy world of my own, apart from others around me. I daydreamed of one day leaving home and striking out on my own, making a living as a farmer or someone who earned a living by working with his hands.

In sixth grade, I had a teacher who was convinced that I should be placed in special education. I was not responding well to her instruction. In fact, I despised her and English was my least-favorite subject. My penmanship was sloppy, my grammar was crude, and my vocabulary was often vulgar. Again, I lived in a fantasy world of one day leaving the city and moving back into a rural area, to perform manual labor.

When I started seventh grade, my parents moved to a new school district, where I had a fresh start. There, I had an English teacher who was a former United States Marine, recently discharged from the service. He took an interest in me and encouraged me to write to express my anger and frustration, which I did in my papers for his class. Over time, with his encouragement, my writing skills improved, and English, a subject that I had once despised, gradually became my favorite. I admired my seventh-grade teacher very much and wanted to become a teacher like him. My parents later moved to Seattle, where I attended high school. I continued to do well in English, because I had an image of myself one day becoming an English teacher.

I attended Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, on a speech scholarship, but after two years there, the scholarship money ran out and my family was unable to pay for my studies. Broke, and without any marketable job skills, I enlisted in the United States Army as an infantryman for four years, spending nearly three years on the Demilitarized Zone in South Korea. While in the Army, I discovered that many fellow soldiers were barely able to read and write, so I spent some of my time during my off-duty hours helping them, including some commissioned officers and senior non-commissioned officers, draft reports and complete income tax returns. I was soon

promoted from private to sergeant. I could see a clear connection between literacy and professional advancement.

After completing military service, I attended the University of Washington on the GI Bill and studied international languages and cultures. Following my graduation, I lived in Taipei, Taiwan for several months, during which time I studied Chinese and taught English conversation and writing courses. I also edited business correspondence for import-export companies in the Taipei area. Once again, I could see the power of English literacy to create opportunities for professional advancement.

In 1985, I returned to the United States and eventually arrived at Washington State University, to pursue graduate studies in English. I have been devoted to the teaching and learning of English, especially college-level writing, ever since.

For me, college-level writing is a career tool. It is a practical, fun way to earn a living. I can draft, and teach others how to draft, short essays, lab reports, research papers, memo reports, whatever. The writing skills that I have learned in the academy can be applied in many different situations, as when drafting military reports, filing federal income tax returns, drafting business letters, and editing business brochures. Although college-level writing offers opportunities to express oneself about important issues of the day, the primary mission for me, as a compositionist, is to teach students the skills that they need to find work that they will enjoy following college graduation. In short, I view mastery of college-level writing as an important step toward academic success, career satisfaction, financial stability and the American dream. I understand that many of my students dislike English classes, just as I once disliked them. Hence, I

am able to address their frustration by sharing my own history with English studies. “If I can do it, you can, too,” is my class motto.

I ask my students to draft assignments that are practical, assignments that will help them to do well in other classes in their majors and may help them in the world of work. I spend time teaching them formal structures about thesis statements, topic sentences, sentence structures, and the like. But I try to accomplish these objectives within the context of completing practical assignments, such as drafting a business report, in which students research and write about a valuable stock market investment of their choice. As a part of this assignment, I also teach them how to select stocks for investment. For me, learning how to write has had practical benefits and I want to share this joy with my students. Learning how to write well is good preparation for finding one’s own version of the American dream and for working hard to achieve it.

Teaching at PCC, I am aware that other colleagues do not share my perceptions of college-level writing. Some colleagues are surprised that I would actually spend class time teaching students about how to invest in the stock market as preparation for asking them to draft a research-based, business-style investment report. For my part, I am surprised that some of my colleagues might ask students to read and draft fairy tales as a part of their cultural studies work in a college-level writing course. Nevertheless, I would not criticize colleagues for giving students writing assignments about fairy tales, as I recognize that these assignments may help some writers to learn how to view various social situations through alternative lenses, which could be very valuable for someone majoring in, say, sociology or psychology. For me, college-level writing is a

flexible skill set that is learned to enable someone to survive in various writing cultures, inside and outside of the academy.

As I explained prior to my performance of bracketing, the reason for sharing these intimate details of my own life with regard to the topic of college-level writing is to share with the reader the lenses I use to view this topic. As a researcher, I need to be aware of how this lens might influence my own interpretations of data. I also need to share this potential interpretation with my readers. Therefore, it is important to compensate for this potential distortion by consciously seeking out other views to interpret phenomena. This is an important task of transcendental phenomenological research.

From this personal accounting, my experience shows that I hold some biases that I must work to control, or at least to acknowledge, during the gathering and reporting of this research. I am from a working-class background and this probably explains, in part, one of the reasons why I am teaching at a community college. I enjoy teaching students who may be attending college while working to support themselves and their families. I like to think that I can inspire them to continue, just as my seventh-grade teacher once inspired me. In addition, I view the learning of writing as a practical tool that students may master to achieve a better life for themselves, for their families. As a compositionist, I am dedicated to my profession, but I also believe that we in the profession must strive continuously to show how our work is relevant to the benefit of our students. I am eager to embrace whatever changes need to be made to survive, both personally and professionally. If I need to adjust the content of my courses to meet

better the expectations or needs of students, I will quickly, readily, do it. Loyalty to tradition will not prevent me from making those changes.

Conclusion

This dissertation's study design applied transcendental phenomenology, a form of qualitative research, to explore the perceptions of community college faculty members about important qualities of college-level writing. Six faculty members were interviewed for two hours each. Interview sessions were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The transcendental phenomenological analysis was applied to the data to discover trends and defining characteristics of the perceptions of community college faculty members about college-level writing. Chapter Four presents the research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter, I apply transcendental phenomenology to present the results of interviews with six faculty members at PCC about their perceptions of college-level writing. As I explained in more detail in Chapter Three, application of transcendental phenomenology involves three main research stages and several steps within each stage. In the first major stage, known as *epoche*, the researcher strives for “Setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 180). This process begins by bracketing personal experience to identify the lens, or personal bias, through which one may view the research topic. The bracketing step of *epoche* was reported in Chapter Three.

In the second stage, *transcendental phenomenological reduction*, interview data are collected and meaningful units are identified, which is accomplished through the process of horizontalization. Following this step, written textural descriptions of each participant’s data provide information about the phenomena from the interviewee’s perspective. Composite textural descriptions of all participants’ data are then identified. In the final major stage, known as *imaginative variation*, individual structural descriptions are identified; these help to explain the underlying reasons behind the textural descriptions. In the next step, composite structural descriptions are provided for the entire group. In the last step, a final textural-structural synthesis is offered that provides meaning and essence of the phenomena studied, from the perspectives of

those included in the study. Once again, to realize this stage, I spent many hours reviewing transcripts and in meditation. I reflected upon the three research questions of the study, and searched for meaningful insights from the data collected about those questions. The results of my effort are reported in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part reports upon the application of steps pertaining to transcendental phenomenological reduction to the interview data collected from the six participants in the study. The second part reports upon the application of steps pertaining to imaginative variation to the interview data collected from the six participants in the study.

Three research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe college-level writing? Do their descriptions reflect the descriptions of college-level writing presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) in their study at GMU?
2. How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe multiple discourses? What are these discourses? Who uses them? Under what conditions? How might these conditions be similar to, and different from, the descriptions found by Thaiss and Zawacki in their study at GMU?
3. What do faculty members of different disciplines in this study at PCC describe as trends in college-level writing, according to their own individual perceptions?

Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction

After bracketing, which was reported in Chapter Three, the next major step in transcendental phenomenological research is to conduct interviews of participants and to transcribe the interviews for later analysis. This step is gathering textural descriptions. In phenomenological reduction, it is important to report the relevant individual textural descriptions of participants thoroughly (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). These individual descriptions serve as a foundation for later analysis, leading toward composite textural descriptions and, finally, steps of structural analysis through transcendental imaginative variation. The individual textural descriptions serve as the foundation for that which follows. As I explained in Chapter Three, in the stage of phenomenological reduction, the researcher organizes data into meaning units, looking for shared characteristics of units to create clusters of meaning. Using this approach, a description of the perceptions of each participant about the phenomenon under study is needed. After the individual textural descriptions for each participant are recorded, the researcher may then apply the same process to all of the individual textural descriptions as a group to create the composite textural description for the entire group. This step-by-step approach is designed to lead toward deeper understanding through systematic analysis of other people's perceptions of a phenomenon.

I provide textural descriptions of the perceptions of each of the six interviewees about college-level writing. Again, the purpose of the textural descriptions is to record systematically the views of the participants about the phenomenon being studied. In

this case, I interviewed each of the six participants about their views of college-level writing and I transcribed the interviews for later analysis.

To gather information about my three research questions, I invited six faculty members at PCC to participate individually in two interviews lasting about 60 minutes each. In the first interview, I asked participants to describe their perceptions about college-level writing. In the second interview, I asked participants about their perceptions concerning possible multiple discourses and general trends in college-level writing. I divided the interview discussions into two separate parts because I needed to provide participants with an opportunity to rest between the one-hour interview sessions. I did not want fatigue to inhibit the responses that I gathered from participants. The interview protocol is provided in Chapter Three.

I recorded the interviews electronically and transcribed relevant parts, which yielded 30 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Applying horizontalization, I studied for several weeks descriptions of phenomena offered by each participant and recorded meaning units onto separate sheets of paper, which I later grouped into categories for comparison.

From the manual grouping of units, categories emerged with multiple units in each, and two core themes became apparent. At all times, while grouping units into categories, I tried to keep in mind the perceptions of the interviewees about the phenomena being studied. I chose to use this manual approach for the development of data. I wanted to develop a rich, personal connection with both the data and my participants, to experience their phenomena mentally and physically in an effort to

break down barriers between my own consciousness and theirs. I wanted to become one with the data, to form a union with it, not only mentally, but also physically.

Moustakas (1994) explains the importance for the researcher who uses transcendental phenomenology to develop a personal rhythm and relationship with the data, to become united with it, as much as possible.

My study of the data presented by my six participants revealed two core themes for this section about individual textural descriptions. After studying the textural descriptions, it became clear to me that the two themes would help to organize the information in a logical, practical, manageable way without distorting the meanings reported by participants. The two themes presented opportunities to view the data from two different yet complementary perspectives.

The two themes were (1) the expectations of the college-level writing at PCC and (2) the recommended strategies for achieving those expectations. Although each of the participants held a different perception about expectations of college-level writing at PCC, there were some important points of agreement within subgroups, as the discussion in the next section will show. These points of agreement were often associated with academic disciplines.

Textural Descriptions of Theme One

The expectations of college-level writing at PCC. Drawing from answers to my interview questions, I was able to group the participants into two sub-themes, according to their academic disciplines. Generally speaking, the English faculty members, both full-time and part-time, expected students to use writing as a vehicle to show the learning of

new academic material and to communicate in a form that showed control over prose language and adherence to more conventional standards of academic discourse.

Speaking of the utility of using writing as a tool to increase learning of content material, Karen said, "A highly skilled, informed writer will write specifically to the task, and bring to bear highly informed, interpretative evidentiary material, clearly organized and explained." With regard to learning to communicate ideas in a particular form, Deseret said of diction, "It's not just about command of sentence structure, or organization, but what kind of language choices are those students making." For Marcia, teaching students to reduce or to eliminate grammatical errors was important: "I tell my students that the grading of papers as you come along are the way for you to eliminate error."

In contrast, the participants from biology, economics, and mathematics viewed prose writing as less urgent for the learning of new content material in their disciplines and did not appear to focus on control of prose writing or with adjusting prose writing to meet the writing expectations of a more general academic audience. Nicole stated that in teaching mathematics, the use of prose writing was not necessary and that she did not find it necessary to focus on form in prose writing produced by students: "The most important thing is that when we read that paper, we need to be able to understand the result. We don't pay very much attention to the grammar, that sort of thing." Carol echoed Nicole's view by stating, "When they [students] describe a scientific process, they could use diagrams, sentences, I don't really care. However they want to present their answer to me is fine." Brian agreed with this sentiment when he said, "I don't get involved in the writing."

Individual textural descriptions. I begin the individual textural descriptions with Deseret. Deseret was a full-time English faculty member. She expected students to draft edited final products that adhered to conventions of standard English. She explained that she valued teaching writing to help students learn how to develop a mature voice by crafting rigorous, scholarly essays supported by outside research and sustained, logical thought. She viewed this task as a maturing process, one that would begin before college and continue throughout life. Speaking about college-level writing, she said: “To me it’s about maturity, which manifests itself in vocabulary choices, recognition of audience, sense of purpose, a sense of development of ideas, a sense of connecting with or bringing some sort of insight to a topic.” The need to craft a mature voice in college-level writing was echoed throughout her interviews. She went on to say, “When I look at college-level writing, I don’t care about the student’s demographic, adolescent or otherwise, but what I’m looking for is a mature voice.” She maintained that the crafting of essays that reflect mature voice would produce trustworthy results, would enhance the reputation of the author. In her words, “I don’t ask my students to be good people, because it’s not about that. It’s about establishing a trustworthy voice. You want someone to take your opinions seriously.” Deseret wanted her students to draft research-based essays in standard English.

Karen was a full-time English faculty member at PCC. For Karen, the primary goal of college-level writing focused more on providing opportunities for student writers to express their ideas about topics, to engage with challenging academic material on a personal, direct level, to use writing as a vehicle to learn about new ideas. Karen tended

to view writing as an opportunity to explore, to learn, and to communicate what was learned. She stated, "I think of college writing as students reflecting on their own experiences and being able to organize an explanation that somebody else can follow. While they're doing it, they make some sort of discovery of their writing." Connecting college-level writing with the personal interests of students was very important to Karen, and this point emerged often during our interviews. This sentiment is echoed in the following quotation:

I'm all for making personal connections with what you're doing, that you tend to be more invested in what you're doing. You don't need to set up the paper as a personal experience essay, but you can bring into the essay the reality, something connected to your own reality.

Karen said that she valued essays in which students would attempt to write about difficult subjects and show imperfect results. Although the logic within papers may fall short, and the organization may not be as clear as one might like, if the students tried hard to learn and to communicate about a challenging topic, Karen felt that this would be successful as college-level writing. She observed, "The best papers, the ones that I like the most, aren't necessarily super well written. The best papers have energy, the student is attempting to write beyond what the student is normally able to write." In short, for Karen, college-level writing reflected a student's desire to try to learn new things, to attempt to grow as an individual through new intellectual experience, to have freedom to make some mistakes along the way.

Marcia was a part-time English faculty member at PCC. Marcia expressed more concern about having students learn personal responsibility to become college-level writers. For Marcia, college-level writing students needed to demonstrate solid mastery of conventions, especially with regard to spelling, punctuation, grammar, paragraph development, and in-text citations. She also reported appreciation for the application of evidence to support general statements. These points were often mentioned during her interviews. These perceptions about the need to follow standard conventions are reflected in the following passage:

And I tell my students that the grading of papers as you come along are the way for you to eliminate error. Each time that I mark that a comma goes here or a semi-colon doesn't belong there, in the next paper, you should know that it doesn't belong there. So when you get to the end of the semester, you should be able to write more error free.

Another important quality of college-level writing for Marcia was teaching students to follow deadlines for submitting papers. This issue was repeated many times in her interviews:

I think that my first responsibility is to teach students how to be a writer which shows me that they've been in the high school for years and have not been responsible for anything. They need to get the papers in on time. I just collected the papers in one class and five were missing. And I heard all sorts of comments, like "My printer didn't have ink, and my grandmother said that she'd print mine, but she didn't." So I said, "Get a better grandma!"

With Marcia, paying attention to standard conventions, following instructions, and following deadlines were important for college-level writing.

Nicole was a full-time faculty member of mathematics. For her, prose writing was used to communicate mathematical concepts and to communicate instructions about how to complete test items and homework assignments. Students in her classes did not use prose writing very often. She explained that math is a language by itself. As students moved into higher-level math classes, the need to write English prose became less. She observed:

In math, we use fewer words, more symbols with students. In developmental math, students like to use words to describe things. When they get into higher-level classes, students like to use math symbols to describe things. Maybe the mathematical symbols are like language, an alternative discourse.

When I asked Nicole about what she might expect to see in writing in a math class at PCC if it were required, she told me that this would probably not happen. However, if a report were to be written in one of her math classes, she would prefer that it be written in a more formal style, with standard spelling, punctuation, grammar, and paragraph organization, though she would not care too much if students did not apply standard conventions of academic writing. With regard to formal writing, she said, “When they write a report, like a lab report, I don’t want them to use text messaging style. We want a more formal style. Don’t use U for you. I want full spelling, complete sentences.” Nevertheless, she did not think that these conventions about form were necessary for teaching students in her classroom, as she later said, “As long as I can

understand it, I can accept it. I wouldn't subtract points from an assignment if students made grammar errors." For Nicole, academic writing appeared in the form of mathematical symbols and equations, not in the form of words, sentences, paragraphs, and essays.

Brian was a full-time faculty member of economics. Unlike Nicole, his students often used prose writing to show mastery of course material. During examinations in his classes, students were asked to read a short article, draft a summary of the article, and draft a critique of the article's main ideas. He did not indicate other expectations about what he would consider to be good college-level writing other than to communicate information clearly, directly. Regarding form of papers, he explained, "It's about the quality of the ideas. It's not about the writing itself. The writing just comes along." He continued, "I don't care very much about grammar, punctuation; it's about the quality of ideas." He described his assigned papers in this passage:

Everybody in my class writes research papers. Each research paper is two pages long, double spaced. I give them a paper to read about theories of economic analysis. It's about seven pages long. They read it, and they summarize what it says. Then I can see if they understand the paper after their reading. Then I ask them to write about how the paper helped them to learn about economics. So I give them those two questions. Then, in the article, I mention that the source of the view can come up, so many of them see that there was a source for the new idea. Many of them in their writing hit that point. That gives them some points in

the assignment. They write two pages, double spaced. I don't give them any other instructions about how to write those papers.

Similar to Karen of English, Brian viewed college-level writing in prose as an opportunity to explore issues, to learn material, to communicate meaning. Like Nicole of math, Brian did not think that mastery of formal conventions of writing was necessary for academic writing in his discipline at PCC.

Carol was a part-time faculty member of biology. Like Nicole, she did not often require prose writing in her classes. She explained that many of her students were destined for careers in nursing or allied health fields, so in her classes, understanding discipline-specific concepts was more important for students than learning how to write academic prose. She explained the situation:

My students have to take microbiology, anatomy, chemistry, physics, physiology. These are the core classes. In my classes, I hear them talking about my chemistry, my physics, my anatomy. And so we don't get to see very much writing. When I assign them written homework, it's usually optional. On the exams, they have to write out answers to the questions, but I don't really see a really great sample of what they can do. They don't have to turn in research papers.

Carol said that the students in her classes answered questions in a variety of ways, including nonverbal communication. The key was to communicate scientific concepts clearly, accurately. She continued:

It's a scientific class, so the questions that are asked are pretty open ended. So when they write an answer, sometimes they can draw a picture and label it. They don't have to write complete sentences or a paragraph. I don't really grade it for the writing style or the grammar. I really am looking for the scientific amount of detail that they can provide. So I have students who would do really poorly in an English writing class, but they can do well in science. I do correct their grammar, or if they write a sentence and make a mistake, but I don't count off for it.

When I asked Carol to describe a well-written piece of college-level writing, she told me that she wanted to see careful, accurate use of factual material and logical conclusions drawn from facts. Describing a paper that she did not like, she said, "The lack of appropriate and careful use of statistics from which to draw conclusions was a problem for me as a scientist." Another important component of college-level writing for her was the ability to explain complicated scientific concepts or processes in one's own words. She observed:

The hard part about the science class is, can you put that in your own words? I think that this has become an issue with so much that is available on the internet, because when we read an essay, we need to check to see how much of that was actually the student's own words, own ideas.

A challenging aspect for college-level writing was being able to apply concepts to new situations, much as a health-care professional would need to do while making rounds in a clinic or in a hospital. Carol explained, "I sometimes ask them to write about

application. I'll ask them to take a piece of knowledge that they have and apply it one step further. They hate this. It's very hard for them."

Composite textural descriptions. So far, the textural descriptions of the six participants provided relevant details of each participant's perception about expectations of college-level writing at PCC. From this textural description of the expectations of college-level writing at PCC among the six participants, a composite textural description emerged. For the faculty members of English, a range was identified for form-related characteristics of desirable college-level writing. Marcia, Deseret, and Karen appeared to agree that characteristics of good college-level writing included focus, organization, supporting evidence, logical development of ideas, paragraph development, sentence structure, and punctuation. However, there was a range among them. For Marcia and Deseret, these characteristics may have been perceived as more desirable than they were for Karen. For Karen, form was important, but desirable college-level writing for her was more about learning challenging new material and attempting to express one's opinions about it clearly to an audience in a sustained, lengthy piece of writing. For the biology, economics, and mathematics faculty members, form did not appear to be as important. What mattered most to them was using writing to communicate ideas clearly, accurately, succinctly and logically. Nicole of math and Carol of biology did not see much need for the use of prose writing in their classes, with Nicole suggesting that mathematical formulas and symbols served as preferred discourse to standard English prose writing.

Textural Descriptions of Theme Two

The recommended strategies for achieving expectations. In the previous section, I presented a textural description of the perceptions of the six participants about core principles of college-level writing at PCC. In this section, I present the perceptions of the six participants about what steps needed to be taken to encourage good college-level writing at PCC.

Individual textural descriptions. English faculty member Deseret perceived that students often benefited by being challenged to read and engage with material that was difficult. As she indicated, with disappointing papers, “It wasn’t that the writing wasn’t college level, but that their work on the assignment wasn’t college level.” Teaching students to develop a calm tone, a reasonable voice were all important, as was learning how to shape prose to conform to the expectations of a particular audience. But she stated a preference for reading writing with skillful use of vocabulary to communicate ideas clearly, accurately. This skillful use of language would result from knowledge based upon careful reading of academic texts. About the importance of language choices, she said:

I suppose I have my own bias, because I’m quick to look at a college-level writer and look at the language choices that writer is making. It’s not just about command of sentence structure, or organization, but what kind of language choices are those students making. That’s not often on course objectives or outcomes, and yet, I would say that we pay attention to those word choices, some of the sophisticated uses of language.

Deseret pointed out that she did not recommend the use of personal, expressive writing to teach college-level writing skills. She stated that she did not perceive that personal, expressive writing was always appropriate for a college classroom, as students may be sharing deeply personal information that could be inappropriate for the instructor and for classmates to know. Moreover, writing about personal topics could make it much more difficult for students to learn how to write in a rational, thoughtful, objective style. Observed Deseret:

I don't fall into the camp of assigning a lot of memoirs, personal writing, narratives, or self-disclosure papers. I have no training in psychology, counseling, identifying red flags. Ethically, I'm not comfortable giving students assignments that delve into deeply personal kinds of experiences, emotional pain kinds of experiences.

Karen, another English faculty member, stated that students needed to be challenged with academic reading and be challenged with the need to write commentaries about what they had read. Karen expressed interest in having students learn to draft lengthy text that synthesized material from multiple sources to explore a particular topic. However, in contrast to Deseret, Karen reported a preference for having students include narratives based upon personal experience as a way to engage personally with the new academic material and with their own writing. She stated, "I think of college writing as students reflecting on their own experiences and being able to organize explanations that somebody else can follow." In her view, an important element of this craft was teaching students to advance arguments within a clear,

particular context that would make sense for both the writer and the reader. She observed:

I think that really good writing is being contextualized. A lot of them have trouble contextualizing what they're doing. The weaker essays are decontextualized. They take for granted you know who I am, what I'm writing, why I'm doing it, etc. So they just start. Or they get at the end and they're just summarizing. They need to know what they're doing, why they're doing it. What ramifications does this have for your future or the future of your own generation?

For Marcia, preparing students to write well in college meant teaching them to follow important conventions about form, including layout, sentence structures, spelling, punctuation, diction, and paragraph structures. Her views were reflected in this statement:

I like to see format followed, because for me, that's structure that I present. And I want to know that they can follow that. So it's ridiculous for me on the third paper to have to put "format" on top of the paper. What I ask for in "format" is name, assignment, and a full date. And the date that I want is the date when a paper is due. And I like a title as an indicator about what I might be able to read. I think that it's also a control for the writer. If you write down for the title "The Old Barn," that's your contract with that paper.

Marcia expressed concern about using the writing class as an opportunity to teach students not only how to write for a college audience, but also how to become more responsible as citizens. She often said, "My concern is their irresponsibility. And so

they don't plan ahead for an assignment that's coming, and that's what I'm seeing." By learning to follow instructions, by learning to follow conventions, and by learning to attend class regularly and on time, Marcia perceived that students became better prepared to succeed academically and in their careers. In this statement, Marcia explained how she once crafted a writing assignment to reinforce her message of personal responsibility:

I'll tell you about an assignment that I used to do. I used to have students do a written excuse about their absence, and it had to be a paragraph. It gave me some other communication with the student. I learned more from them. But is that invading their space? I thought that it was a reasonable assignment. It was about responsibility. I thought that it was positive. But I gave it up, because of the privacy issue and because it was that much more for me to read.

Among the English faculty members, a range emerged about recommended strategies to encourage good college-level writing. For Marcia, the best way was to teach standard conventions, forms, and procedures and to hold students accountable for demonstrating mastery. At the other end of the range, Karen emphasized more about encouraging students to read academic papers and to draft personal responses to the material through narrative form. In between Marcia's and Karen's approaches was Deseret's approach: she wanted her students to read academic work and to engage with it, but she also wanted her students to maintain more of an aloof, rational, objective tone and form in their writing.

Nicole, the math faculty member, stated that she did not envision much need to include prose writing in her classes. At PCC, her experience consisted mostly of oral interactions with colleagues and students. When she wrote to students, it was usually in the form of symbols, equations, numbers: the language of math. She explained her situation:

We really don't use writing a lot. So I don't see student writing very often. In college, I get regular communication from my colleagues through email, and from the school. Most of the writing is in email messages.

Nicole did not communicate to me about how writing should be taught by colleagues in other disciplines. She emphasized during the interviews that the key to learning how to become a good college-level writer was through reading academic texts and carefully planning, arranging written messages in a logical order, a clear framework. Nicole said:

I feel that the most important thing is for students to read more, then they can write. And students have to understand that when they write to professors, they can't use text messaging. The structure of the message is very important, even more important than the grammar. For example, they need to use a topic sentence for each point paragraph.

Although Nicole expressed dislike for informal text messaging communication, even in email messages from students, she expressed willingness to accept it: "In the beginning, when I saw it, I would get kind of upset, but now, I have to tell you, I say it doesn't matter. I accept the text messaging. I would consider this as an alternative discourse

that I might accept.” In short, Nicole perceived the language of mathematics to be a form of college-level writing and she did not see much need to have students draft prose writing in her mathematics courses.

Brian, the economics faculty member, perceived that good college-level writing was more about clear communication of new, exciting ideas. As long as he could understand what the student was attempting to communicate in writing, and as long as the content of the writing was original and clear, he was content with its quality. To encourage improvement of college-level writing across campus at PCC, he recommended that English faculty members develop new, innovative assignments that motivated the curiosity of students to look at the world through fresh perspectives. To become a good college-level writer, a student must first find passion for the subject to be written about. He described this as finding “hunger for truth.” He explained his view in this comment:

I don't care very much about grammar, punctuation; it's about the quality of ideas. Historically, people believe that the quality of writing is declining. I don't know if I should say this, but the English professors don't give the students opportunities to develop the new ideas. If there are really good ideas, the students are pressured to write about the good ideas. But just asking them to write about general questions isn't helpful. The students lose their motivation to write. I think that that could be the reason why the writing skills are declining.

To find this passion, Brian asked his students to read academically challenging articles about economics and to respond to these articles in two-page critiques. Students were

graded based upon the quality of the ideas that they communicated in their two-page responses, not on the form of their papers or their writing styles.

Like Nicole, Carol, the biology faculty member, reported that students in her classes generally did not need to draft prose papers. Her focus was on teaching students principles of biology to help them pass their examinations, which included little opportunity to write beyond short, specific, responses to each of several different questions. She stated, “I have a lot of stuff that I have to get through in my book, and there isn’t a lot of time.” She also explained that sometimes students would not need to use written prose to communicate successfully an answer on a test: “When they describe a scientific process, they could use diagrams, sentences, I really don’t care. However they want to present their answer to me is fine.” Like Brian and Nicole, Carol stated that she perceived the quality of college-level writing in prose form to be in decline:

I feel that in the 10 years that I’ve been teaching here, that there’s been a slow demise in the level of writing. I don’t know, maybe it’s because of technology.

Their spelling is horrible. My spelling has gotten horrible. Maybe it’s because of spellcheck?

To improve the quality of prose writing across campus, Carol stated that faculty members would need to focus on teaching and having students demonstrate principles of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Because of her heavy curriculum, she stated that she would not be able to address these issues in her classes. Carol said, “I think that it’s really hard for students in my class to really focus on good writing, because they don’t

have to. I don't make them." Carol also maintained that to become good college-level writers, students needed to be taught how to connect ideas logically, to reach conclusions based upon thoughtful consideration of appropriate evidence. In the following passage, she described the importance of learning to make logical connections in writing:

Sometimes I'll show my students something from the textbook and I'll say, "What's wrong with this?" It doesn't have anything to do with the writing style, but it's probably more about the details or the order in which you present them, making sure that it makes logical sense.

In the next section, I provide a comprehensive description of perceived trends revealed in the textural data collected from the interviews of all six participants.

Composite textural descriptions. I discovered that the biology, economics and mathematics faculty members did not view the teaching of college-level prose writing as necessary in their classes. Nicole and Carol perceived that prescriptive forms and rules should be taught by English colleagues. Carol also appeared to favor explicit teaching of logical analysis as a part of college-level writing instruction. As for Brian, he stated his perception that good college-level writing results when students are inspired by innovative faculty members using creative assignments.

Although there were differences of opinion among the three English faculty members about how to encourage good college-level writing, those differences appeared to be relatively few in comparison to the differences between the English and the biology, economics, and mathematics faculty members. The English faculty

members supported the teaching of forms, conventions, and rules, at least to some extent, whereas the biology, economics and mathematics faculty members either challenged the importance of it (in the case of Brian) or viewed it as important but did not see an opportunity to teach it in their classes (Carol and Nicole). Furthermore, the biology, English and mathematics faculty members perceived the quality of college-level prose writing across campus to be in a state of general decline. This contrasted with the views of the three English faculty members, none of whom expressed a view of student writing being in a general decline in quality.

In contrast to these different perceptions between English and biology, economics, and mathematics faculty members about the quality of college-level writing and how it could be encouraged to develop, some common areas were found among members across the two groups. Marcia of English agreed with Carol of biology and Nicole of math about the need to teach students how to apply rules, forms and conventions to become good college-level prose writers. Nevertheless, Carol and Nicole did not share Marcia's desire about using writing instruction as an opportunity to teach students to become more responsible citizens. Likewise, Karen and Brian agreed about the need to encourage students to approach academic work creatively and to encourage students to engage with it personally. Nonetheless, Brian did not share Karen's commitment to the teaching of rules, forms and conventions as a part of that process. In a sense, one could argue that Deseret's viewpoint offered a common ground; she advocated for the teaching of rules, forms, and conventions, along with struggle over content, as all connected with the teaching of good college-level writing.

However, Deseret did not agree with Karen's opinion that good academic writing should allow for personal narratives in which an author connected with a topic in a more personal, even emotional, way.

In the second part of this chapter, I probe more deeply into understanding reasons behind the participants' perceptions that were expressed in the individual and composite textural descriptions. I also explore implications of findings with regard to each of the three research questions that were presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Transcendental Imaginative Variation

Imaginative variation in transcendental phenomenology is an important step because in it the researcher interprets the textural data for underlying structural relationships between ideas that may help to understand why people perceive things as they do. The researcher continues to look for underlying structures that reveal unity, or synthesis, of the various perceptions studied. Writes Husserl (1950): "Any Objective object, *any object whatever* (even an immanent one), points to *a structure, within the transcendental ego, that is governed by a rule*" (p. 54). In this stage, the researcher relies on his or her imagination to find underlying structure. Observes Moustakas (1994), "The thrust is away from facts and measurable entities and toward meanings and essences; in this instant, intuition is not empirical but purely imaginative in character" (p. 98). Because of the researcher's reliance upon personal imagination to find structure within textural description, he or she cannot claim to have found the only pathway to truth. However, the transcendental phenomenologist should be able to

conclude a research effort by understanding better the underlying principles (essence) of a phenomenon, as perceived by those who were interviewed in a particular place and at a particular time. Moustakas (1994) explains, “The essences of any experience are never totally exhausted. The fundamental textural-structural synthesis represents the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon” (p. 100).

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I apply to the textural description the steps of individual structural description, composite structural description, and textural-structural synthesis. In the textural-structural synthesis, I also discuss the implications of this study for each of the three research questions that appear at the beginning of this chapter.

By studying the textural descriptions for 10 to 15 hours each week over three months, and by meditating frequently to focus my mind before each two-hour period of study, I became, over time, familiar with the details of each participant’s textural description. I understood each textural description individually and how it compared to the textural descriptions of the other five participants. This position better enabled me to then look at the data from multiple perspectives, to test different interpretations, and to reach a unified understanding of the data. As I explained in Chapter Three, structural descriptions include both the identification of patterns found in the textural descriptions with an understanding of why the patterns occur. Structural descriptions

are about “recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).

The process of applying imaginative variation was time-consuming, intuitive. Husserl (1950) writes of the importance of imagination in this process: “Every imaginable sense, every imaginable being, whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent, falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity, as the subjectivity that constitutes sense and being” (p. 84). The perceptions of each participant became realities in my consciousness, which enabled me to work with them to explore relationships among ideas. Moustakas (1994) describes this situation: “In Imaginative Variation the world disappears, existence no longer is central, anything whatever becomes possible” (p. 98).

The individual structural descriptions of each participant for the two themes are presented below. Following this, I present the composite structural description and, finally, the textural-structural synthesis.

Structural Descriptions of Theme One

The expectations of college-level writing at PCC. In this section, I provide a more concise summary of the six participants’ views concerning their expectations about the characteristics of college-level writing. This is an important step in the process of working toward the composite textural description of their perceptions about college-level writing.

Deseret, an English faculty member, communicated that she wanted her writing students to demonstrate control of conventions to meet expectations within the

academic community. She said that she wanted her students to learn content well enough to have thoughtful ideas to express in essays. The quality of ideas and the quality of the appearance of the final product were very important features of academic writing for her. To explain her perceptions of academic writing, she often used phrases such as “trustworthy results,” “take your opinions seriously,” “reputation of the writer,” and “mature voice.” During the interview, Deseret expressed concern that, over time, the teaching of writing courses could be assumed by faculty members in other academic disciplines at PCC, greatly reducing the need for English faculty on campus. For example, when speaking of the rise of multimedia writing, she stated: “I think that there’s going to be pushback, because the more we move away from words on paper, the more we enter into other disciplines’ realms, and the stronger that argument is going to be, then why does writing need to be housed in English?” Setting high standards for both content and form of essays may have been Deseret’s way to provide some pushback, to keep writing courses valuable within the academy.

Karen, another English faculty member, wanted her writing students to engage personally with challenging readings, to develop thoughtful, research-based narratives that explored relevant social and cultural issues from a personal perspective. For Karen, mastering college-level writing meant teaching students to understand deeply about context: the context of the written prompt, the context of the student’s background, the context of the class readings, the context of the society in which we live. In her perception, good college-level writing takes these diverse issues into consideration. For these reasons, she did not subscribe to a set of rules to be followed to show mastery of

college-level writing. She stated, “So you can say that a five-paragraph essay is stupid, unless you have Dostoevsky writing a five-paragraph essay. It kind of depends on the writer and the topic.” Speaking of the importance of adapting to context in writing, Karen used phrases such as “attend to the task,” “listening to what’s being required,” “personal connections with what you’re doing,” and “mental maturity.” Like Deseret, Karen expressed concern about the future of writing courses in English departments. She explained that compositionists must work hard to keep their craft relevant within the context of the college community.

Marcia, an English faculty member, understood college-level writing from the perspective of the need for students to show mastery of disciplinary conventions to be followed, forms to be learned. She spoke more about how the skills developed in a writing class can help students to become better members of society. These skills included learning to follow directions, to appreciate the value of academic conventions, to follow prescribed formats, to attend class regularly, and to be on time. During the interview, she used terms such as “eliminate error,” “read the instructions,” “10-sentence paragraph,” and “standard English usage.” For Marcia, college education was about the teaching and learning of course content along with learning to become a responsible citizen.

Nicole, a faculty member of mathematics, indicated that she emphasized the teaching of mathematics as the written language of her classes. She stated that as students progressed in math, their need to write English prose in math classes became less and less. Nonetheless, she perceived that prose writing was an important skill in

college, though she did not ask her students to use it in her classes. In situations outside of her classes, she said that students would learn to write prose well by using grammar, spelling, and punctuation correctly. She also spoke favorably of point-paragraph structures, which she viewed as very clear and helpful to communicate academic messages. During the interview, she often said expressions like, “We don’t use a lot of writing,” “We don’t use writing assignments very often,” “We don’t use poetry,” “We don’t use short stories,” etc. Her goal was to teach students how to communicate their ideas about math through mathematical symbols and formulas. During the interview, Nicole indicated that she appreciated the presence of writing courses and writing instruction on campus at PCC, though she lamented how writing was becoming more informal in style. She stated that she preferred to receive from students email messages written in standard, error-free prose. However, she did not see an opportunity to have students use prose writing in her classes.

Brian, an economics faculty member, asked his students to communicate learning through short, research-based, two-page papers. For his papers, he asked that students draft a summary of an article along with a thoughtful response. Brian stated that he did not evaluate students based upon the form of the paper or the correctness of the grammar, spelling, or punctuation. He stated that the message of the paper needed to be clear and thoughtful, though. Brian stated that he felt that learning to write prose well, with professional format and fluent sentences and error-free grammar, would be a good skill to learn in college, but he did not think that it was necessary for his students to apply this in his courses. Like Nicole, he believed that writing standards

were becoming looser, but unlike Nicole, he held the English faculty members accountable for the decline in standards. He used words such as, “English professors don’t give the students opportunities to develop the new ideas,” “Asking them to write about general questions isn’t helpful,” and “The students lose their motivation to write.” Although Brian was critical of English faculty and included writing assignments in his classes, he did not express a need or interest in working with students to develop writing skills. He stated, “I don’t get involved in the writing.”

Carol, a faculty member of biology, asked her students to communicate their learning of scientific concepts on short-answer exams. Often, the short answers were very short: a sentence, a few words, or even a drawing. Like Nicole, Carol stated that good prose writing was important in college, but she did not see much opportunity to apply it in her classes. As with Brian and Nicole, Carol believed that the quality of students’ prose writing ability had declined over the years. She blamed the decline in standards on text messaging, spell checkers, and easy-going public school teachers. As with Nicole and Marcia, Carol expressed appreciation of writing that was focused, well organized, and error free. At no point during the interview did Carol express a need to teach prose writing skills as a part of her course. Carol stated that she could not do this, as her course was heavy with scientific material and she needed to work hard to get through her syllabus without the added burden of teaching students how to become better prose writers.

Structural Descriptions of Theme Two

The recommended strategies for achieving expectations. In this section, I provide a more concise summary of the six participants' perceptions concerning their recommended strategies for helping students to achieve college-level writing. This is an important step in the process of working toward the composite textural description of their perceptions about college-level writing.

Deseret, one of the English faculty members, perceived that the best way for her to teach college-level writing was to focus on having students read challenging academic texts about socially relevant issues and to write research-based responses. She stated that mastery of language was important as a marker of good college-level writing ability, and she stated that she perceived reading to be valuable in supporting the development of good writing skills. Teaching writing students to think in a rational way was another important goal for her and she included tasks that would encourage the development of mature, thoughtful voice.

Karen, another English faculty member, advocated for providing students with assignments that would connect them to controversial, socially relevant topics in a personal way. She stated that she encouraged her students to gather supporting information from outside sources, but she also encouraged her students to include relevant personal experience in their papers. For Karen, the student's personal experience was an important text that needed to be studied and included in writing.

Marcia, an English faculty member, indicated that she wanted her students to learn how to apply standard conventions about grammar, spelling, punctuation,

paragraph development, and essay organization. Marcia emphasized that the structural lessons of the grammar book and the textbook would provide the content of her courses. Her goal appeared to be to teach formal language skills as a means to be effective college-level communicators and also to teach students to be responsible in life.

Nicole, a mathematics faculty member, expected her students to use language and to apply conventions appropriately in her classroom context. In this respect, her underlying value appeared to be very similar to Marcia's. Nevertheless, Nicole's emphasis was on having her students learn about the application of the rules of mathematics. She perceived that the use of English prose among her mathematics students would naturally disappear in her classes, as students became more proficient in the language of mathematics, which she viewed as a written discourse.

Brian, a faculty member of economics, stated that he wanted his students to learn about economics and to use writing as a way to communicate mastery of learning economics. Although his students wrote short article reviews in his classes, Brian stated that he had few rhetorical or language-related expectations for them to follow. Brian admonished English faculty members to improve the writing of students by developing better, more engaging topics for students to write about. This suggestion underscored Brian's view that the content of the course would drive the development of writing skills.

Carol, the faculty member of biology, reflected sentiments very similar to those expressed by Nicole. Carol wanted her students to use writing to communicate concepts

clearly. Like Nicole, Carol said that she accepted written answers on tests that might not have prose writing: the answers could be expressed as numbers, formulas, charts, graphs, and sketches. Carol often pointed out during her interviews that her courses were heavy with scientific material that had to be taught and that she did not have time in her syllabus to work with students to develop their prose writing skills.

Composite Structural Description

In this section, I summarize the underlying, structural trends found in the individual accounts of the six participants about the characteristics of college-level writing. This is the final processing step before the textural-structural synthesis, in which the underlying perceived essence appears and the research questions can be addressed.

The six participants held different perceptions about the surface features of college-level writing. As I pointed out in the textural description, Marcia perceived that good college-level writing needed to conform to conventions about governing grammar, spelling, punctuation, paragraph structure, essay structure, and general format of the paper. These standards were shared by Deseret, who also emphasized that she wanted students to demonstrate the ability to articulate complex academic arguments in their writing. Karen said that she wanted students to attempt to engage with new and challenging ideas, as did Deseret. However, Karen did not express as much preference as Deseret did regarding mastery of specific rules about grammar, spelling, and punctuation. In contrast to these perspectives, the biology, English and mathematics faculty members wanted their students to demonstrate enough mastery of English prose to be able to communicate the content of important ideas in their classes. Nicole,

Brian, and Carol all emphasized wanting students to communicate a clear understanding of the subject matter. Nicole and Carol did not require their students to write in standard English prose: often a symbol, a number, a formula, a chart, a graph, or a sketch would suffice. Nicole claimed that these multiple discourses were forms of college-level writing.

What united these very different perceptions of college-level writing and how it should be taught was an underlying perception that the purpose of higher education was to help students to achieve mastery of the lessons of their courses. College-level writing might include a phrase that answers a specific question on a biology exam in Carol's class. However, a phrase in response to an essay prompt in Deseret's class would probably be inadequate. The key to making sense out of this would be to borrow from Karen's explanation about the importance of context. As Karen pointed out, good college-level writing depended upon the task and the student's understanding of what that task required. To try to define a concept of college-level writing based upon the presence or absence of language characteristics, without regard to the requirements of the underlying task and its disciplinary context, would be unproductive.

The perceived content or focus of the course would provide the context through which college-level writing would be defined for the student. Nicole, Brian and Carol all perceived that the focus of their classes was on learning the details of their academic subjects. College-level writing was determined by the task at hand to promote student learning. Nicole was teaching her students an alternative discourse, college-level mathematics, and she was doing her best to encourage her students to apply the

language of mathematics to communicate disciplinary knowledge. Carol's students had more need of using English prose than Nicole's students did, but not much more. Brian indicated that he expected his students to draft several two-page article reviews, but the form of the papers was not a factor in his evaluations of student work. He wanted to be able to understand what the students were trying to communicate about the subject of economics. The English faculty members—Deseret, Karen, and Marcia—all expressed that they wanted students to learn and to apply rules about standard English prose, with varying degrees. Marcia indicated that demonstrating mastery of conventions was very important; Karen indicated that she placed less emphasis on mastery of conventions. Yet all three English faculty members brought into their classes individual content that determined the ways in which they taught college-level writing. Deseret stated that she wanted students to read challenging academic articles and to develop into mature, rational writers and thinkers; therefore, she assigned to her students more formal essays and fewer narratives. Karen perceived that the best writing happened when students became personally engaged with a topic, so for her, the focus of the content of her class was on the development of each student's world view by reading challenging articles about social trends and reflecting about them through narrative writing. For Marcia, the focus of her classes was on mastering conventions of style and form appropriate to academic discourse and on learning how to work within the writing class to demonstrate responsibility as a citizen.

Textural-Structural Synthesis

A textural-structural synthesis presents the underlying structure, the perceived essence, of the phenomenon under study, as a result of the step-by-step synthesis of information applied throughout the entire process of transcendental phenomenology. Next is the stage of textural-structural synthesis. As this process unfolds, data are processed systematically from the details of raw reports into more general, abstract principles. These principles lead to a deeper understanding of the perceived phenomenon and its underlying structure.

In this section, I apply trends in the interview data uncovered and discussed in the composite textural description to each of the research questions presented at the beginning of the study. The research questions guide the development of the textural-structural synthesis and the presentation of detailed findings in a more abstract, general form.

The first research question. The first research question is, “How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe college-level writing? Do their descriptions reflect the descriptions of college-level writing presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) in their study at GMU?” As I explained in Chapter Two, Thais and Zawacki (2006), concluded, based on the results of their qualitative study at George Mason University, that college-level writing, in the opinions of faculty members at GMU, demonstrated three important qualities. These were as follows:

1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.

2. The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception.
3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response.

The first research question of my study explored the applicability of Thaiss and Zawacki's three hypotheses in a community college context. The results from this study mostly supported the three hypotheses about the characteristics of college-level writing proposed by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006).

Reviewing the data presented in the textural descriptions, the six participants in my study agreed with Thaiss and Zawacki's first hypothesis, that college-level writing, demonstrated "Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study" (p. 5). Deseret summed up the sentiments when she compared college-level writing to a musical performance: "It (college-level writing) is performance, it is bringing together writing with the maturing adult." The participants in my study differed about what the features of college-level writing looked like. For Deseret, college-level writing resembled a highly polished, research-based essay, written in a formal, objective style, that would synthesize information from multiple sources and credit each of those with proper MLA citations. For Karen, a college-level paper would include elements of Deseret's formal structure, but with some modification. Karen also wanted her students to include narrative, first-person accounts, to help the authors connect the topics of their essays to their lived experiences. Marcia wanted her students to apply formal structures and conventions to produce prose that could be applied in a variety of situations within the college community. Brian, Carol and

Nicole emphasized the importance of learning to write in their own disciplines, which was different from the expectations of the English faculty members. Brian accepted short papers in which students did not need to demonstrate mastery over standard conventions about grammar, spelling, punctuation, and paragraph structure. Carol and Nicole accepted written answers on examinations that were appropriate for their fields but that English faculty members probably would not identify as prose writing. Nicole explained that these kinds of communications were written discourse in the academy.

The second hypothesis presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) stated that college-level writing would show “The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception” (p. 5). As reflected in the details of the textural descriptions, for the most part, the six participants in my study appeared to agree with this hypothesis. Nicole, Brian, and Carol perceived their academic work as scientific; therefore, they wanted their students to think logically and to reach conclusions based upon careful analysis of factual material. Marcia and Karen, careful to point out that they valued logical development of ideas in student writing, provided opportunities for their students to engage with writing topics personally, emotionally, sensually. Observed Karen, “I’m all for making personal connections with what you’re doing, that you tend to be more invested in what you’re doing, that your heart is more into what you’re doing.” Nevertheless, in Karen’s view, passion needed to be balanced with calm, cool, rational thought. A view could be passionately argued, but it also needed to be framed in context of the facts.

The third hypothesis of Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) stated that college-level writing expects “An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (p. 7). All six of the participants, as reflected in the information that they shared during their interviews and as reported in the textual descriptions, mostly supported this statement. Brian, Carol and Nicole wanted to analyze the written responses of their students from a scientific, logical perspective. Deseret and Karen used the terms “coolly rational” in their descriptions of how an academic audience studied the qualities of their arguments in a piece of writing. Marcia explained that one of her most-common suggestions that she wrote on students’ papers was about the need to include more evidence to support generalizations. A difference, however, emerged about what might constitute acceptable information. As I explained in my discussion of the first hypothesis above, Karen and Marcia were more accepting of some first-person, narrative accounts within the context of college-level writing. Marcia elaborated:

They [students] need to write about what they know, or they need to go out and get that information. If they want to write about “The Old Barn,” I ask the question, “Have you ever seen one?” If not, they need to get out and see one.

The other participants said that they did not want first-person, narrative accounts; they wanted to see facts from academic sources written about objectively, without the inclusion of personal experience or emotion, to prevent sentiment from influencing judgment.

The details within the textural descriptions of this study generally support the three research hypotheses of Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). The participants of this study largely agreed that college-level writing reflects “persistent, open-minded, and disciplined study,” that there is “dominance of reason over emotion,” and that there is “an imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (pp. 5-7).

Table 2 provides a visual summary of the salient results for the first research question.

Table 2

Summary of Results for the First Research Question

Descriptions of Thaiss and Zawacki	Brian	Carol	Deseret	Karen	Marcia	Nicole
College-Level Writing shows persistent, open-minded, disciplined effort	A	A	A	A	A	A
College-Level Writing emphasizes reason over emotion	A	A	A	M	A	A
Readers of college-level writing are viewed as coolly rational	A	A	A	M	M	A

Note. The first research question states: How do faculty members at PCC describe college-level writing? Do their descriptions reflect the descriptions of college-level writing presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) in their study at GMU? A means agree with statement; D means disagree with statement; M means views are mixed about statement.

It might be tempting to attribute the different perceptions among faculty about how college-level writing needs to appear as reflecting differences in disciplines. However, drawing this conclusion could be problematic. This study included three faculty members from English, but the other three were recruited from three different

disciplines: biology, economics, and mathematics. Each of these participants could not individually represent all of the attitudes and all of the values of all faculty members within their respective disciplines. In Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) study, the economist they interviewed stated clearly his expectation for students to draft papers in "standard edited English" (pp. 68-69). In my study, the economist stated that he did not emphasize the need for students to submit their work in standard edited English.

More research involving more faculty members of various disciplines within community colleges needs to be conducted to gather enough information to understand better the perceptions of faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing.

The second research question. The second research question of this study is, "How do faculty members in this study at PCC describe multiple discourses? What are these discourses? Who uses them? Under what conditions? How might these conditions be similar to, and different from, the descriptions found by Thaiss and Zawacki in the study at GMU?"

Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), in their study, described several features of multiple discourses mentioned by faculty members at GMU. For those teaching in the sciences, the use of personal writing, including the first-person pronoun, was viewed as generally risky to one's career. In contrast, other fields—such as history, nursing, and anthropology—were open to accepting more personal writing as college-level writing. Some faculty also communicated a growing, yet still limited, acceptance of partisan political argument as a form of college-level writing, at least in the field of anthropology.

Several participants described the need of authors to be able to shift forms and styles of writing, depending upon the level of expertise of an audience. Changes in vocabulary, sentence structure, format of the paper, personal reference, and emotional intensity were reported, depending upon the needs of a specific audience. As a result, the participants in Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) study reported that undergraduate students needed to be taught to write in a variety of different ways for a variety of different situations.

As reflected in the textural descriptions, most of the six participants included in this study allowed for some limited use of multiple discourses. Deseret appeared to be the more traditional reader of college-level writing. She wanted her students to draft formal, objective essays with clear thesis statements, carefully crafted objective arguments, synthesis of outside sources, and application of MLA standards in format. Deseret was not supportive of personal narrative as a form of college-level writing. For her, personal narrative was a form of discourse that could only be used sparingly, if at all. As she explained, she did not want the reporting of personal experience to interfere with rational analysis of information gathered from outside sources. Moving along the range, Karen welcomed research-based personal narratives. For Karen, personal writing was allowed, even encouraged. However, Karen stated that she would not permit poetry, drawings, and digital images as replacements for prose writing to communicate ideas in her writing courses. Marcia, who often taught her students to draft essays that might resemble the traditional five-paragraph essay in form, indicated that she would accept innovations, depending upon the topic and the interests of the student. When

asked about multiple discourses in composition classes, Marcia stated, "I think that poetry would be okay. As long as it's done with writing. If someone were to give me an assignment in poetry form, I would take that." Marcia stated that she would not accept visual images or other non-prose items as a substitute for college-level writing.

Continuing, Brian stated that he wanted his students to draft two-page article reviews, with a summary and an analysis section. As long as the students communicated knowledge and learning of economic theories in the analysis section, he would accept the writing. Carol and Nicole wanted clear, precise responses to specific exam questions. The responses could be communicated using short phrases, complete sentences, paragraphs, drawings, tables, mathematical symbols, and mathematical formulas. By their responses, Carol and Nicole appeared to be most tolerant of accepting multiple discourses as college-level writing. Nicole explained that the use of mathematical formulas, calculations, and symbols was a form of discourse in college-level writing.

As shown in the textural descriptions, the participants in my study, as a group, presented students with a variety of different expectations about writing, and these expectations reflected their perceptions of the needs of the content of the courses being taught and the educational philosophies of the faculty members. In this study, faculty members in English tended to view college-level writing as a performance of writing English prose in an essay form. For faculty members in math and science, college-level writing was interpreted to mean written communication of complex academic content, often in the form of brief prose statements, mathematical writings, tables, and sketches.

Table 3 presents a visual summary of the salient findings for the second research question.

Table 3

Summary of Results for the Second Research Question

Types of Writing Permitted	Brian	Carol	Deseret	Karen	Marcia	Nicole
Article reviews	√					
Charts, drawing, images		√				√
Formal, research-based essays			√	√		
Five-paragraph essays					√	
Mathematical or scientific notations		√				√
Personal narratives				√		
Poems					√	
Telegraphic statements		√				√

Note. The second research question states: How do faculty members at PCC describe alternative discourses? What are these discourses? Who uses them? Under what conditions? How might these conditions be similar to, and different from, the descriptions found by Thaiss and Zawacki in the study at GMU?

√ means accept this assignment.

What might account for these differences in perceptions about the characteristics of multiple discourses in college-level writing? Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) suggest that the expectations of faculty members often conform to general academic values, disciplinary and sub-disciplinary perspectives, local practices, and personal visions. The limitations of this study resulting from small sample size and the complexity of the potential interactions of these variables suggests that the six participants of this study cannot be expected to represent fully the views of all other colleagues from their respective disciplines. More research needs to be conducted to understand better the perceptions of community college faculty members about multiple discourses.

The third research question. The third research questions is, “What do faculty members of different disciplines in this study at PCC describe as trends in college-level writing, according to their own individual perceptions?”

Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) found that their participants reported a little more acceptance of what once were considered to be alternative discourses. Greater acceptance of personal writing in the humanities and social sciences would be an example. Another example would be greater acceptance of diverse ways to conduct academic inquiry, such as ethnography. Nevertheless, some trends in student writing were steadfastly resisted by GMU faculty. As a case in point, prose construction was expected to follow conventions of standard English, including in writing done for digital media.

In contrast, as reported in the textural descriptions, all of the participants in my study at PCC, identified a clear trend of greater informality in student writing. They claimed that text messaging and relaxed enforcement of grammar rules by faculty members were the reasons to account for these changes. Although the participants in this study generally recognized greater informality in college-level writing as an undesirable general trend, the biology, English and mathematics faculty members did not view this trend as an impediment in the teaching of their subject matter or in the learning of their students. They accepted it as a general, inevitable social trend and two of them recognized pictorial expression of academic learning on paper as a form of college-level writing.

Table 4 presents in visual form the salient results for the third research question.

Table 4

Summary of Results for the Third Research Question

Trends in Writing Observed	Brian	Carol	Deseret	Karen	Marcia	Nicole
More informality in style, grammar	√	√	√	√	√	√
Growing Popularity of text messaging	√	√	√	√	√	√
Relaxed enforcement of grammar rules	√	√	√	√	√	√
Growing popularity of images over prose		√				√

Note. The third research question states: What trends can be found in the interpretations of college-level writing among faculty members of different disciplines? Among tenured and adjunct faculty members?

√ means agree with this statement.

Once again, the six participants in this study cannot be expected to represent the perceptions of all of their community college colleagues. Nevertheless, their reports cannot be ignored, either. To extend our understanding, what is needed is more research involving other community college faculty members to complement the results of this study. By including more participants, it may be possible to develop a deeper, broader, more representative data sample for analysis. This would strengthen our understanding of the perceptions about college-level writing among faculty members of various disciplines.

The fourth hypothesis. As I studied these textural descriptions, and as I reflected about the results of the study by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) at GMU, I realized that participants in both studies were sharing their perceptions about how to instruct students to succeed within the world of the academy. Although my study found evidence from participants that generally supported the three hypotheses of Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) about key qualities of college-level writing, I discovered that the

underlying principle supporting all of this was the effort to provide students with the social capital that they needed to build their careers within the academy.

This prompted me to develop a fourth hypothesis about college-level writing to complement the three presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). As reflected in the textural descriptions of this study, *college-level writing demonstrates flexible use of printed words, symbols, or images to communicate complex, abstract ideas with enough clarity and precision to be understood by an expert audience*. This section continues to explore the reasoning behind the new hypothesis in more detail.

As Bourdieu points out, professional mobility requires the building up of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984a; Bourdieu, 1984b; Bourdieu, 1991). In other words, the person intent upon social advancement needs to attempt to join the elite by mastering nuanced rules of social conduct and by learning to conform to social norms. Once a person has learned those lessons, he or she can expect to receive institutional support. Regarding the power of language to advance careers, Bourdieu argues that the power comes not from the language itself, but from the prestige of the institutions associated with the language (Bourdieu, 1991). Keeping this principle in mind, it would appear that what is ultimately determined to be college-level writing depends upon the endorsement of those who are experts in their relative disciplines and who hold the power of social advancement for colleagues and students. Within the community college setting, as suggested by this study at PCC, another defining characteristic of college-level writing is how well the process of writing helps a student to learn or to communicate the learning of college-level subject matter. Hence, a mathematical proof written onto a math

examination may count as much as college-level writing as a research paper completed in a history or an English class. The issue is not about the language form of the writing, but about its perceived academic and social value, as determined by those who are experts in the field and who hold social power, and by the benefits that its use bestows upon the authors.

As this study may suggest, English faculty members may perceive research-based essays as a preferred form of college-level writing. In contrast, scientists and mathematicians may perceive mathematical calculations and formulas as preferred college-level writing. Both perceptions would be accurate within the boundaries of their respective disciplines.

Conclusion

Presenting transcendental phenomenology step-by-step, this chapter was divided into two main parts. The first part examined the interview data of six participants at PCC by applying steps involved with transcendental phenomenological reduction. These steps included individual textural descriptions. Two themes of the textural descriptions emerged: (1) The expectations of college-level writing and (2) the recommended strategies for achieving expectations. From these, a composite textural description emerged.

The second part of the chapter reported on the results of the data analysis through transcendental imaginative variation. Underlying principles causing the appearance of textural descriptions, both individual and composite, were presented for the six participants according to the two themes that emerged from the textural

descriptions. Finally, the textural-structural synthesis was presented, in which the three research questions of the study were answered with regard to the underlying themes found in this study.

The participants in my PCC study agreed with the results of the Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) study, that college-level writing exhibited clear evidence of persistent, open-minded, disciplined study. My study's participants agreed that there needed to be dominance of reason over emotion. My study's participants recognized that a reader of college-level writing needed to be someone who was "coolly rational" and eager to form a critical response. The participants in my study were, for the most part, aware of and welcoming of multiple discourses, although they did not agree about what form those multiple discourses could take. The participants in my study agreed that college-level writing appeared to be moving toward informality, and all six of my participants agreed among themselves, at least in a general way, that this was probably an undesirable trend. The six participants of my study appeared to be motivated to help their students to develop the social capital that would be needed to achieve disciplinary and social advancement within the academy. Success in helping students to achieve this social purpose, apart from specific linguistic or rhetorical forms, may be the best determinant of what is or is not college-level writing, at least in the context of PCC.

Near the end of this chapter, I presented a new hypothesis about college-level writing, a hypothesis that complements the three hypotheses previously presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). My hypothesis is as follows: *College-level writing demonstrates flexible use of printed words, symbols, or images to communicate*

complex, abstract ideas with enough clarity and precision to be understood by an expert audience.

In the next chapter, I discuss potential implications of these findings for the teaching of college-level writing in the context of modern American community colleges.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Changing Expectations

On April 23, 2015, PhD candidate Patrick Robert Reid Stewart of the University of British Columbia (UBC) successfully defended his 149-page dissertation about indigenous architecture (Hutchinson, 2015). Successfully defending a PhD dissertation is a milestone event for any PhD candidate; however, Stewart's success was also a milestone in higher education for reasons unrelated to research of indigenous architecture. Stewart wrote most of his dissertation without standard English punctuation. He did not apply conventions of standard English punctuation. He chose to write in an oral style that would reflect the communication style of native peoples of Canada. His decision was an act of resistance, a statement about the need of mainstream academia to respect the communication styles of other cultures. Using standard written English, Stewart (2015) explains his controversial approach in the introduction of his dissertation:

For the writing style to not follow standard or conventional academic English, the formatting and punctuation or lack thereof, has grown out of my need to privilege Indigenous knowledge in resistance to the colonizing provincial education system that continue to traumatize indigenous peoples in this province. The following *adaawaḱ* [story or teaching] about teaching adult indigenous learners contextualizes the need for a discursive space to privilege an indigenous methodology. You, the reader, will notice a change in writing style

from standard or conventional academic English to one you may be quite unfamiliar with, but read it as if i am speaking directly to your heart. (p. xi)

That Stewart would choose to draft the bulk of his dissertation in an oral style was noteworthy. That the University of British Columbia accepted it as doctoral-level work was also noteworthy.

Changes in expectations about what may be acceptable as college-level writing have happened before in American higher education. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, until about 150 years ago, college students in America were generally expected to read and write in Latin to show that they were well educated. Only in more modern times was standard English accepted as the medium of written communication in college classrooms. As I summarized in Chapter Two, many scholars believe that writing may be considered academic when it attempts to communicate important ideas, share deep thinking about abstract thoughts, consider relevant evidence, and provide a careful synthesis of perspectives (Addison and McGee, 2010; Anson and Forsberg, 1990; Beaufort, 1997; Bizzell, 1999; Gentile, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; Tinberg, 1997).

Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) found evidence to support their hypotheses that college-level writing would be “persistent, open-minded and disciplined in study,” that it would reflect “dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception,” and that it would imagine the reader as “coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (pp. 5-7). Although Stewart’s dissertation did not apply standard conventions of punctuation, it satisfied the expectations of the dissertation committee and the university.

Balancing Form and Content

Stewart's UBC dissertation committee chose to value the content of his academic research and to recognize his decision to resist standard English punctuation in favor of communicating in a more oral style, a style more familiar to native peoples of Canada. In this study, I discovered that the biology, economics, and mathematics faculty members also chose to value the content of academic discovery produced by students without requiring application of rules governing standard English prose. Among the English faculty members, there were important disagreements about the need to balance form and content in college-level writing.

The tensions between balancing form and content expectations were revealed throughout the textural descriptions. Whereas Deseret and Marcia held clear expectations that excellent ideas would be presented in conventional academic prose in essay form, the other participants appeared to be more flexible. Karen, another English faculty member, was more interested in reading first-person narrative experiences, and she was accepting of errors in prose, as long as students appeared to be trying hard to master challenging academic concepts in their writing.

Biology, economics, and mathematics faculty members Brian, Carol, and Nicole were especially open to the possibility of accepting multiple forms of discourse in written communication, as long as it conformed to the tenet of my hypothesis: College-level writing demonstrates flexible use of printed words, symbols, or images to communicate complex, abstract ideas with enough clarity and precision to be understood by an expert audience.

In each case, the biology, economics, and mathematics faculty members of my study explained that non-traditional forms of written communication were acceptable, as long as they facilitated communication of abstract concepts of course learning. Like Stewart's UBC dissertation committee, Brian chose to focus on the quality of ideas presented in a paper, not on application of standard English language conventions for written discourse. One could argue that this was a form of alternative discourse: Brian allowed it in his classes, though other faculty members, especially those in English, may not have allowed it. Support for my hypothesis also came from Carol of Biology and Nicole of mathematics. Both of these participants were willing to accept drawings, charts, graphs, formulas, and scientific symbols as forms of college-level writing on their written exams. Again, one could claim that these were examples of college-level discourses, and Nicole presented this idea to me during our interviews.

Deseret, Marcia and Karen all expressed concern about the erosion of standards in college-level writing over time. These opinions were held particularly strongly by Deseret and Marcia. Their concerns were probably similar to the attitudes of scholars who taught Latin in American colleges 200 years ago. Although students in colonial colleges could have expressed their knowledge of course content through English prose, they were expected to demonstrate their college-level learning by communicating in Latin, not in English (Halloran, 1975). Eventually, American college students were permitted to communicate lesson material in English, as long as the dialect conformed to British English, the preferred form (Miller, 1991).

Developing Social Capital

As this discussion suggests, what is perceived to constitute college-level writing is socially determined by those who are experts in their disciplines and who have control of institutions of higher learning. Bourdieu (1984a, 1984b) points out that academic norms reflect social norms. Students who want to advance themselves within the social hierarchy need to build up enough social capital to make their advancement possible. In American colonial colleges, learning to read, speak and write Latin provided students with valuable social capital to succeed. For most American college students today, the study of Latin probably provides only limited social capital. As my study suggests, in contemporary American community colleges, much social capital may be derived from learning to communicate complex scientific, mathematical, and economic concepts through English prose, scientific symbols, mathematical formulas, sketches, diagrams, and charts. In addition, English prose, when written in some disciplines, may not necessarily need to conform to contemporary notions of standard grammatical form.

Thaiss and Zawacki (2006)'s findings also supported the notion that authors of college-level writing are usually expected to demonstrate control of reason over emotion or sensual perception. While most of the participants in my study expressed statements that supported this hypothesis, one hesitated. Karen of English maintained that writing was a learning process and that to be a good learner, one needed to engage personally with the material, often through a first-person account. Although students were expected, ultimately, to show the victory of reason over emotion in college-level writing, Karen gave them plenty of allowance to work through their impressions, their

personal experiences, as they reached for a rational solution about a complex issue. She stated: “I’m all for making personal connections with what you’re doing, that you tend to be more invested in what you’re doing, that your heart is more into what you’re doing.” This study at PCC found evidence that the participants generally confirmed the second hypothesis of Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) regarding the perceived need in college-level writing to demonstrate the control of reason over emotion but, unlike in the study of Thaiss and Zawacki, I found evidence that at least some faculty members may welcome some emotion in writing as students struggle to reach a reasoned, personally relevant, conclusion.

The third hypothesis of Thaiss and Zawacki claimed that writers of college-level writing anticipated a reader who was “coolly rational,” someone reading to make a reasoned response. The participants in my study expressed support for this view. Nevertheless, Karen of English indicated that in her classes, personal writing was very important as a tool for students to come to grips with academic material and to learn from it. In some cases, at least for Karen and for others who teach writing to learn, the audience of college-level writing may not always be “coolly rational.” In fact, that reader might even be interpreted to be “warmly supportive.”

The need to help community college students to develop personal connections with subject materials and with faculty members is important. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, community college students often attend part time, often have one or more dependents living at home, and often come from the lowest economic quartile (NCES, 2012). About 58 percent of community college students need to take remedial

courses (Fulton, 2012). Community college faculty members, including those who teach writing, need to work especially hard to help their students to succeed in college-level courses. Would providing at-risk writing students in community colleges with a reader who is “coolly rational,” without warm emotional support, be helpful?

Personal writing, the type of writing used by Karen in her classes, encourages students to tap into their own interests and to use writing as a tool for shared discovery, for finding one’s own voice in a supportive environment (Macrorie, 1985; Miller and Judy, 1978; Spigelman, 2004). Bizzell (1999) claims that personal writing can be blended with other forms, to create compelling and rigorous academic products.

Most of the faculty included in my study expressed concern about the erosion of standards of college-level writing. Brian of economics, Carol of biology, Nicole of mathematics, Marcia of English, and Deseret of English all expressed concern about the negative influences of modern social media upon the formality of college-level writing. Reflecting this trend, Nicole observed, “I personally don’t think that text-messaging style is college-level writing. But the trend is going that way.”

Balancing College and Career

Nicole’s statement points to a theoretical conflict with important practical implications. Although social conventions within PCC (as reflected in the perceptions of faculty members) suggest that informal writing is much more acceptable now than it was, say, 30 years ago, does this trend legitimize the changing of expectations among those who are responsible for teaching and accepting college-level writing? Or should faculty members of college-level writing resist these trends? Stewart (2015) claims that

changing expectations leading toward greater informality and a more oral style of writing is a refreshing, democratic, liberating trend:

it reinforced my culture by reinforcing my writing as spoken word part of an oral tradition that has existed since time immemorial this writing style requires particular deliberation it is not random it is democratic it is not hierarchical as you have no doubt noticed there is little adherence to punctuation as you read this dissertation the symbols in table 1 will be used as a way to connect and emphasize thoughts and words (p. xii)

While the adjustment of conventional form might be more democratic and supportive of students' use of vernacular language varieties, would it promote the long-term career interests of community college students? In Chapter Two, I explain in greater detail Bourdieu's theory about the development, the preservation, and the distribution of social capital. For students to advance socially and economically, they need to learn to master the nuanced rules of social advancement, including the use of more prestigious forms of language. Because community college students often come from homes with limited financial resources, and because many are first-generation college students, would it be wise for college faculty members to accept from them writing that does not reflect conventional standards in content and form that other colleagues would expect to see in college-level writing? For example, Brian of economics indicated that he did not expect his students in their papers to apply standard conventions about grammar, spelling, and punctuation but, in contrast, Deseret and Marcia of English did.

Recommendations for Research

Transcendental phenomenological research is an effective research method to learn about the perceptions of participants. As with any other qualitative research design, findings from transcendental phenomenological research need to be interpreted and applied cautiously, responsibly, yet open-mindedly. Moustakas (1994) advises: “Through Imaginative Variation, the researcher understands that there is not a single inroad to truth, but that countless possibilities emerge that are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of an experience” (p. 99).

The six participants of this study shared their perceptions about characteristics of college-level writing, and I am very grateful for their generous participation. Although the insight of each participant is valuable, it cannot represent the perceptions of all other colleagues within a particular discipline. As Moustakas points out, other possibilities exist, other interpretations of truth remain to be heard. Researchers have opportunities to apply transcendental phenomenology in other contexts and with other participants to gather a broader, deeper understanding of the perceptions of community college faculty members about the characteristics of college-level writing.

My study explored the views of six community college faculty members: three from English, one from biology, one from economics, and one from mathematics. Other colleagues within these disciplines were not interviewed and their perceptions are not reflected in this study. Clearly, more participants from each of these disciplines need to be interviewed. One participant from a discipline is not enough. Nevertheless, this study offers a beginning. By interviewing more than one faculty member in a discipline, and by

including other disciplines in the conversation, it would be possible to understand more about the complexities of perceptions about college-level writing held by faculty members within community colleges.

By interviewing three colleagues from English (and not just one), I learned that there are indeed several different perceptions about the characteristics of college-level writing. As I explain in the textural descriptions of Chapter Four, Marcia tended to focus more on teaching students about traditional grammar structures and the organization skills associated with the five-paragraph essay. Karen emphasized more about reading for knowledge, connecting the material to personal life, and drafting personal essays that show connections between academic knowledge and personal experience. Deseret preferred to teach students how to work with published sources to draft formal, objective research papers written in standard English without references to personal experience. In this study, each of the three compositionists approached the task of teaching college-level writing from a different perspective, yet each corroborated the three hypotheses proposed by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). They expressed interest in finding within students' writing some evidence of persistence, open-mindedness, and disciplined study. They may have allowed for some sharing of emotion in writing (Karen), but they expected to see plenty of reason within the development of academic arguments. Although the reader might be warmly supportive (Karen), the audience still held final written products accountable for achieving expectations, indicating the presence of the reader as someone who is "coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response" (Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006, pp. 5-7).

In short, this transcendental phenomenological study does not close the discussion about what faculty members in community colleges perceive college-level writing to be. Rather, the results point to an open door, to many opportunities for further research.

Recommendations for Teaching

Perhaps the best approach would be to recognize the importance of context in determining what is and what is not college-level writing. An insightful, sophisticated, evidence-based, rational idea communicated in a grammatically challenged sentence as an answer on a science examination could count as an excellent form of college-level writing. In contrast, the same type of response to an essay question about a reading from history or literature might result in a failing grade. Likewise, resisting formal conventions about standard English grammar, spelling, and punctuation might be appropriate in a University of British Columbia dissertation exploring the effect of indigenous culture on modern architecture, but the same approach might be totally unacceptable in an Indiana University of Pennsylvania dissertation exploring essence of college-level writing using transcendental phenomenology. Perceptions of the essence of college-level writing are less about the identification of particular features of style or content and more about taking into consideration the expectations of an intended audience within a particular disciplinary context. For this reason, the expectations of academic audiences about what is or what is not college-level writing vary greatly and need to be further explored.

Near the end of Chapter Three, I bracketed my own experience with college-level writing and explained why I wanted to enter the field of teaching English composition. For me, learning how to write for a variety of different audiences and in a variety of different social contexts became an enjoyable way to earn a living. I have enjoyed sharing this knowledge with my community college students, many of whom—like me when I was an undergraduate—are first-generation college students from families with limited financial and social capital. After conducting this study, and after reflecting about my own experience with the field, I recognize the need to develop a writing curriculum that will challenge students to open their minds to the breadth of college-level writing. Short, crisp, single-sentence responses may be appropriate for short-answer exams in math and science, but students may also need to know how to grapple with an extended research-based essay, depending upon the expectations of the faculty member teaching a particular course. These are all examples of college-level writing, and students, especially those at the community college level, need to learn to be flexible enough to handle the wide variety of challenges within the realm of their social context.

Before we can teach students about what we as compositionists expect with regard to college-level writing, we need to understand better what our students need to learn to be effective as educated, literate citizens in the modern American community college. Given the complexities of modern academic disciplines, this task is idealistic and probably impossible to achieve completely. Nonetheless, its difficulty does not excuse

us as professionals from trying to improve our understandings, to improve the educational experiences of our students.

We as compositionists need to be sincerely respectful of the various native languages and dialects of our diverse students. How do we strike a balance between the need for communication with the need for respect of disciplinary and cultural diversity? In my opinion, Karen's underlying pedagogical approach may offer a potential solution. While she advocated for the need to challenge students to read difficult texts and to write about complex issues in an academic style that followed formal conventions, she also advocated for providing students with opportunities to become personally engaged with writing through the drafting of personal narrative. By her account, even her research-based library assignments included opportunities for students to include some personal narrative. She attempted to blend both traditional academic conventions with personal and cultural sensitivity.

In my own teaching of first-year composition courses for community college students, I have found it helpful to follow an approach similar to the one advocated by Karen. My first assignment at the beginning of the semester offers an example of how this works. I ask the students to draft a personal narrative about a specific literacy-related event in their lives that was very meaningful for them. The event could be pleasant or unpleasant, it could be something that happened in school or out of school. I encourage students to include in their narratives realistic, local, colorful dialogue between characters of their story to show how the event unfolded. I also show students how to balance their local dialogue with narrative reflections that communicate

meaning to the rest of us in class through standard English. This balanced approach in the first assignment sets a positive tone for the semester. The assignment celebrates the beauty and the diversity of various dialects and languages, but at the same time it also emphasizes the importance of learning to write in standard English to communicate with a wider academic audience. I have had much success with this assignment.

However, as this dissertation study suggests, not all colleagues teaching in a community college would agree with my approach of using personal writing to teach college-level writing skills.

More research is needed to learn about the perceptions of community college faculty with regard to the preferred role and characteristics of college-level writing across the community college curriculum. Learning more about the characteristics of college-level writing within the community college is an important task. Transcendental phenomenology is a research method that can help us to understand more about the perceptions of community college faculty members regarding the characteristics of college-level writing, but continued research is necessary. This dissertation research marks a beginning, not an end.

Limitations of the Study

As with any research effort, this study has its limitations. Sample size and selection of informants would be an important limitation to note. With only six participants included in the study, it is impossible to generalize from the data collected about the perceptions of other faculty members beyond this study. At some future date,

after additional studies add to the body of available literature, some generalizations may be possible to make.

Another important limitation involves the presence of my own bias as researcher regarding the design of the study, the collection of the data, and the interpretation of the results. Although transcendental phenomenology can assist the researcher in controlling bias, some will remain. I am a compositionist teaching at a community college and I am drafting a dissertation to complete a PhD degree in composition studies. How I design my research questions, design my interview questions, gather my information, and interpret my results will reflect my identities, my lived experiences. Nonetheless, I have attempted to report faithfully the results of the interviews and to interpret them with care.

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