Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 10, No. 3, November 2010, pp. 31 - 40.

The student-authored essay as a teaching tool

John R. Slade Jr.[1]

Abstract: Students who enter college dreading their "required" courses are understandably skeptical of their ability to succeed in first-year writing. Their lack of preparation added to their skepticism results in students with too little confidence that their writing will ever resemble the models used in textbooks. As a tool of engagement, student-authored essays provide writing models students readily identify with, thereby promoting confidence. This analysis examines student perceptions of the student-authored essay as a writing tool and the implications of its use to improve learning outcomes in first-year writing courses.

Keywords: composition strategies, essay models, first-year writing, foundation writing courses

Uncertainty about the effectiveness of my teaching techniques created considerable stress during my first years as a composition instructor. Before I was introduced to the formal language of assessment, I employed the rudimentary practice of asking students every few weeks what they found particularly helpful or unhelpful about my teaching. The first time out, I phrased the call for feedback something like this: "Write down anything I'm doing that helps you learn the material along with those things that don't help much."

Student essays used as writing models garnered the most frequent and positive comments from my informal assessment. The feedback indicated that students felt closer kinship with essay models written by their peers. More captivating was the self-confidence created from the sense that they could reach levels of writing proficiency exhibited in essays by other students. Conversely, most suggested little assurance their writing would ever resemble that of the accomplished authors who appeared in their textbooks. Throughout those early years of community college teaching, I employed this crude but seemingly effective technique of formative assessment in most classes I taught. After returning to the classroom after many years in administration, I have resurrected this informal practice of real-time assessment. This paper reports on a formal follow up to that practice and examines whether students perceive student-authored essays as more beneficial teaching aids than professional writing models.

I. Background.

This study was undertaken in fall 2008 and spring 2009 at NC A&T State University to examine the efficacy of a pedagogical tool, the student-authored essay. One of sixteen constituent campuses of the University of North Carolina System, NC A&T enrolled 10,388 students, 8,829 of whom were undergraduates, during the period of this study. Of the undergraduates, 1,607 were first-time freshmen with an average SAT score of 900 (442 verbal) for in-state students and 1,002 (493 verbal) for out-of-state students (NC A&T, 2010). The University of North Carolina (2010) reported the average SAT score for all sixteen campuses as 1,083. Forty-five percent of NC A&T's fall 2008 first-time freshmen ranked in the top two-fifths of their high school class,

[1] Department of Liberal Studies, North Carolina A&T State University, 1601 East Market St., Greensboro, NC, 27411, jrslade1@ncat.edu.

and slightly more, 47 percent, ranked in the bottom three-fifths (NC A&T, 2010). The verbal score takes on a prescient nature if, as was the case for NC A&T in fall 2009, the SAT score is the only factor used in determining student preparation for placement in the first-year writing courses.

In fall 2006, North Carolina A&T implemented an ambitious general education reform program designed around the concept of interdisciplinarity. Critical Writing, one of five foundation courses required of all students at NC A&T, uses critical thinking explicitly as scaffolding for developing writing skills (Graves, 2006). Though approximately 300 freshmen enrolled in a developmental writing course, university policy did not obligate them to register for the preparatory course. This practice of optional placement combined with moderately low selectivity results in writing classes populated with students of wide-ranging abilities. As a member of the writing team, I can attest to the concerns voiced by writing faculty who often find it difficult to gauge how much review and remediation to provide. The division requirement to adhere to a common syllabus and assignments (in part to facilitate the collection of valid assessment data) in some ways conflicts with needed and appropriate remediation based on formative assessment.

As with any institution, NC A&T's student profile influences the day-to-day instructional challenges writing instructors must manage. Based on the institution's results from its participation in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, NC A&T students do not place as high a priority on skills, behaviors, and dispositions generally associated with college success. In 2005 and 2007, the Wabash College-led study gauged student opinions and feedback from 27 institutions on several factors considered pertinent to college performance and success. NC A&T students ranked near the top in categories measuring aspirations such as desire to earn high grades, to draw a high income, and to engage in entrepreneurship. However, self-reported dispositions and behaviors normally associated with high ambitions placed NC A&T students near the bottom, 26th, for instance, when asked if they were willing to work hard to earn superior grades. They charted similar results in responses to questions about their reading habits, ranking 25th when queried about their willingness to stay with a good book without falling into boredom (Childress and Southerland, 2008, pp. 16-17).

The dichotomous attitudes students report in the Wabash study extend to their perspectives on learning to write competently. My own students generally agree with the utilitarian purposes of obtaining sound writing skills; however, far too many do not consider the far-reaching consequences of poor writing skills to a career. While such student attitudes stem in part from freshman naiveté, their erroneous notions sometimes persist until the alerts they eventually awaken to come too late for comprehensive treatment.

II. Objective of Study.

This study aimed to gain some measure of how students perceive two types of writing models used in a foundation-writing course. In the Critical Writing course at NC A&T State University, instructors routinely employ as instructional tools model essays supplied by the textbook and its supplements. During fall 2008 and spring 2009, the Critical Writing courses used *Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing* by Sylvan Barnett and Hugo Bedau (6th edition) as its primary text, which included a mix of writings by professional authors and student-authored essays, mainly intended to model application of various rhetorical modes. It seems intuitive that instructors would rely more heavily on the student-authored essays as models to develop student

writing since students are more likely to recognize their own writing patterns in the work of other students. What seems likely, however, is mitigated by another important goal of the instructor, which is to encourage students to develop reading habits befitting college students and eventual college graduates. As Emory University's Mark Bauerlein (2008) describes in his book about the digital age's effects on the intellectual development of today's youth, students who have relegated their sources of information and models of communication to informal and brief modes such as net magazines, social networking sites, and email are suffering predictable negative consequences. To reverse the decline, instructors battle back in one of the few ways they can, which is to assign well-regarded pieces of writing with hope that students will notice and emulate the techniques of good writers.

It is easily understood that students who bring less than adequate preparation for college writing coupled with dispositions that hinder their engagement with the subject are less likely to believe that their writing skills will ever match those exhibited in models highlighted in a textbook. This is the focus of this small study – to note student perspectives of writing models used in foundation writing courses at NC A&T. The broader question is whether the analysis of these perspectives can provide useful guidance in what may be more effective in teaching foundation writing courses, especially at an institution where under-preparedness and negative dispositions toward positive collegiate habits conflate to create even greater challenges to achieving proficiency in a fundamental skill.

III. Procedure and Results.

This study surveyed freshmen students at North Carolina A&T State University enrolled in the university's required foundation writing course titled Critical Writing. Students from five classes (n = 84) were given a questionnaire that solicited feedback about the writing models used during the term. The questionnaire categorized the writing models as "student essays" and "professional essays," was administered the last day of class, and requested the following assessments from students: which category more clearly represented the concepts taught during the semester, which category they referenced more often when applying the concepts to their own writing, and which category they recommended for future sections of the course. In addition to choosing from given responses, students were given the opportunity to elaborate on their choices. The questionnaire also solicited information on previous college-level writing courses students had taken, what types of writing assistance (if any) did students utilize outside of class, and whether students were repeating the course. Twenty-two, or 26 percent, of the respondents completed other college-level writing courses prior to completing Critical Writing in either fall 2008 or spring 2009, and 12, or 14 percent, were repeating the course. All but 8 of the 84 students who completed the questionnaire sought assistance outside of class during the term. Writing assistance utilized while enrolled in the course included such services as the campus-based writing center, internet-based writing tools, tutors, and interaction with the instructor via email and office visits.

Survey responses shown in Table 1 below align with the anecdotal responses received from earlier experiences with community college students. By almost 3 to 1, students sampled in this study preferred the writing models by students to those authored by professional writers. In line with the community college students, freshmen at North Carolina A&T State University expressed similar reasons for preferring the student models. The most prevalent reason cited greater identification with the student papers and therefore more confidence in the ability to

successfully complete similar writing exercises. The frequency table below presents the frequency results:

Table 1. Student preference for category of model essay (n = 84).

	Frequency	Percent
Student-Authored Essays	63	75
Professional Essays	21	25

Students surveyed employed the word *relate* most often in detailing reasons for choosing the student essays. Based on the informal feedback from the community college experience, it was expected that students in first-year writing courses at the senior institution would match the sentiment.

It is necessary to note that students tended to provide their own gloss to the two core terms used in the survey: *professional essay* and *student essay*. Any essay appearing in the textbook, no matter its label or author, many students considered professional work. They reasoned that any essay in the textbook had earned its way in and therefore must be of superior quality. They then concluded that any essay, professionally authored or otherwise, between the covers of a textbook created a greater challenge to emulate and learn from (at least psychologically). Informal feedback suggested that the more likely students were to judge a textbook essay of "professional" quality, the less they felt it benefitted them as a learning tool. Consequently, class activities based on essays from the textbook yielded less discussion than student models provided from present or former students. Though students tended to draw some distinction between student essays in the textbook and those from their peers or former students, they overwhelmingly favored the student essay when presented as a generic category.

Student preference for the student-authored essay far outpaced the rate at which students reported how often they referenced this same category of essay, as Table 2 below shows:

Table 2. Type of essay students referenced most often (n = 84).

	Frequency	Percent
Student-Authored Essays	43	51
Professional Essays	38	45
Both about the same	3	4

The results above may mask a wider gap between how often students used one essay type over the other. In an informal follow up, students indicated that they defined a key term more broadly than anticipated. Some students interpreted *referencing* an essay as any use or mention of it. For instance, students considered an essay assigned as homework as a reference to it. Some students added to their count in-class uses of the essay, even those instances that I initiated. Therefore, it is a reasonable conjecture that the manner in which I referenced the essays in class and how often I directed attention to them likely influenced student responses concerning this variable. This is particularly noteworthy because it is true that I spent more time in sustained discussion of the essays from the textbook. I did so because of students' reticence when discussing textbook-based essays. In terms of self-selected use, some students admitted that they never referenced the essays in the text beyond homework, class discussion, and explicit directions to review them (which was often). Therefore, it is possible that the mismatch noted could be a result of the manner in which students interpreted the term *reference.*

Verbal feedback from students combined with a cross tabulation analysis of the essay type preferred and the category referenced more often provided a clearer snapshot of student perspectives. Of the 63 students who judged the student-authored essay as more aligned with concepts taught in the course, 30 said they referenced the student essays more often and 30 made the opposite choice. Thirteen of the 21 students who viewed the professional essays as more representative of the course concepts reported using the student-authored essays more in completing their own assignments.

The lopsided results regarding recommendations students made for future foundation writing courses are more difficult to understand. As Table 3 below illustrates, students responding to the questionnaire overwhelmingly recommended both essay categories:

Table 3. Type of Essay Students Would Recommend for Use (n = 84).

	Frequency	Percent
Student-Authored Essays Only	11	13
Professional Essays Only	0	0
Both	70	83
No Response	3	4

None recommended the professional essay as a single source, and 11 respondents endorsed the use of student samples only. Though the numerical data favored both essay categories in this questionnaire item, written comments tended to nuance the responses. The remarks below typify feedback from students who recommended an even balance of student-authored and professional essays:

- *Although I liked the professional essays better, some students may be able to relate to the student essays.*
- *The professional essays make me think a little harder while the student essays you understand right away.*
- *Though professional [essays] may be easier to reference or go along with, the student essays may relate more to me and I can find similarities. The students peer edit and grow in that process.*
- *With professional [essays] it's easier to see more techniques; with students it is easier to understand.*

Overall, student comments showed clear recognition of the benefits and drawbacks to both types of essays as teaching tools. Several comments mentioned that the exposure to professional essays illustrated what students might achieve. In many cases, a student's desire for reliable and repeatable writing approaches applicable to other course work mitigated desire to emulate writers accomplished enough to have their work appear in a textbook.

IV. Discussion.

It is clear that students in this study responded with marked difference to the two categories of writing samples used in class. Students interpreted value in both categories of writing samples but gave more credit for their writing development to student-authored samples, namely because they identified more with writers who were also their peers. Perhaps this perspective by students indicates that reading, discussing, and learning from a peer possibly provided a psychological lift that built confidence. The positive response to student-authored essays, which students believed more clearly delineated the structures, techniques, and rhetorical tools taught in foundation

writing courses, suggests that writing models perceived as accessible matter, especially for the marginal writer. In other words, the student-authored essays, especially those outside of the textbook, employed techniques and forms considered more basic and therefore more recognizable to developing (transitioning) writers.

But what is basic? To what degree is the foundation-writing course obligated to take a student beyond what some call the formula essay? Does the so-called formula essay do more harm than good for students? To address this question, I will examine a common component emphasized in the formula essay that is not always clearly reflected in professional essays used as teaching samples. This element is the *topic sentence.*

Crew (1987) points out that rules listed in writing texts and taught by teachers of composition often contradict the practices of professional writers (p. 346). To illustrate his point, he references Braddock (1974), who analyzed 25 articles from magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* regarding the frequency and placement of topic sentences. Braddock's essay famously estimates that only 13 percent of expository paragraphs he reviewed began with a topic sentence and that uses of topic sentences vary by author. Many composition experts continue to connect Braddock's statistic to outmoded thinking regarding the necessity of topic sentences. However, reading Braddock more closely makes his often-quoted statistic seem out of context. Actually, his analysis leads him to the conclusion that composition teachers and writing handbooks should provide fuller disclosure about the lessons they teach and the contradicting practices of professional writers. In fact, as the passage below shows, Braddock indicates that more use of topic sentences in the samples in his study would aid reader comprehension, and he advocates that composition teachers should continue to illustrate for their students the benefit of the topic sentence in learning to develop good paragraphs:

> In my opinion, often the writing in the 25 essays would have been clearer and more comfortable to read if the paragraphs had presented more explicit topic sentences. But what this study does suggest is this: While helping students use clear topic sentences in their writing and identify variously presented topical ideas in their reading, the teacher should not pretend that professional writers largely follow the practices he is advocating (Braddock, 1974, p. 301).

Rather selective readings of Braddock's essay fail to acknowledge the narrowness of his target; he limited his study to articles in popular magazines. As Popken (1987) points out, Braddock's analysis is instructive regarding the writing styles of general interest magazine authors, but their use of topic sentences – or lack of use – may indicate more about the interplay among topic, audience, and writing style than it does about the usefulness of the topic sentence. Viewed from this perspective, Braddock's article describes the stylistic practices and preferences of professional writers and simply alerts teachers to reframe their instruction regarding the necessity of the topic sentence as a rhetorical tool. Therefore, it is inaccurate to suggest that his study assails the topic sentence.

However, since Braddock's article is often cited and the implications perhaps too broadly applied, Popken's article calls for further studies to correct misapplications of Braddock's conclusions. D'Angelo (1986) responds to those who move past Braddock and who actually campaign against the topic sentence as nearly useless in teaching composition. He counters with research in reading comprehension that demonstrates better student recall and efficiency when

students read information organized with topic sentences and other structural techniques (p. 438). He concludes the following:

> If we base the teaching of writing on the way people actually write (i.e., on rhetorical performance), then the topic sentence will be of limited use in the teaching of writing, since many professional writers do not use topic sentences. But if we base our teaching on what people can accomplish with language (i.e., on rhetorical competence), as it seems to me 19th-century composition theorists did, then the topic sentence can be a useful resource that writers can turn to if the need arises. (D'Angelo, 1987, p. 439)

Comments from students who participated in this study of student-authored essays illuminate a remnant of D'Angelo: Student writers long for instruction and instructional tools that emphasize immediate and practical uses.

As has been pointed out, Braddock's research on the topic sentence limits its analysis to pieces from popular magazines, which led some to question whether its results generally applied to academic forms of writing such as those found in textbooks. Smith (2008) returns to Braddock's influential research and re-examines his method as well as replications of it, concluding that Braddock's deduction does not generalize to forms of writing students most often encounter in courses outside of composition and literature classes. Smith's research analyzes journal articles in history and shows that 95 percent of what he calls discourse block units (one or more paragraphs that develop a sub-topic of the main topic) are controlled by an explicit topic idea. More to the point, his analysis finds that a topic idea appears at the beginning of the discourse block two-thirds of the time (p. 89).

Though Smith (2008) applies the implications of his research primarily to developing reading skills, he does mention its applications to writing instruction (pp. 78-79). For a student, writing must be practical. While most students will agree in principle that their writing skills may matter some to their future career, finding a successful formula for college writing assignments supersedes four years hence. From this perspective, students hold greater appreciation for writing instruction that will help them achieve success in other courses. Their responses in this study suggest that the student-authored essay as a teaching tool more effectively and efficiently aids the goal of transferring writing skills to other college courses. Not only do students psychologically identify with student samples, they also can detect in them a formula they cannot always see in the highly stylized professional writing samples offered up in college readers and composition texts.

A writing model derived from a "formula" is likely to remind composition teachers of the much maligned five-paragraph theme, which many instructors consider the result of a mechanical, stifling process that results in empty prose. However, the degree to which students are concerned with the freedom to experiment with various techniques and stylistic embellishments may depend somewhat on the preparedness of the individual student, and it seems reasonable that entering students would desire a basic set of writing tools applicable to most formal composition assignments. Not all skills may require even distribution; the level of a student's competency in a skill depends largely upon how essential it is to success in the discipline. The need for history majors to master math at the same level as chemistry majors is debatable. This is not to say that history majors are incapable of learning complex math or that chemistry majors cannot or should not become good writers. This merely implies that in some cases, proficiency may suffice for a skill that is tangential rather than central to success. Average

students need and desire writing models that clearly illustrate rhetorical tools and techniques reflected in learning goals, and the stylized presentations of professional writers often contradict the basics students need. Think of it in sports terms. Beginning amateur golfers who take lessons will encounter basics, not techniques intended to resemble the greatest golfers in the world. Professional athletes, aided by some natural ability, have developed their talents well beyond rudimentary principles. Put another way, professionals are so accomplished in the fundamentals of their craft that they can interpret and reconfigure the basics into a style of their own.

Style is often a seamless combination of small, imperceptible elements that only the trained eye can detect and truly appreciate. And it is style that marks the professional essays often assigned to beginning student writers. As Jenkins (2010) aptly comments, ". . . some writers may, over time, move beyond formulas. They may develop the desire to explore meaning more deeply and discover for themselves how organization can derive organically from content. In fact, we have a name for such writers. We call them 'professionals'" (para. 23). It is true that some students are accomplished enough in their writing to create clever metaphors and turn colorful phrases that tend to impress their teachers. Effective essays, however, should not belong to the artistic alone; in fact, Jenkins asserts that the formula essay is the right tool to develop good writers, and this seems the prevailing sentiment of freshmen I have taught.

Before Jenkins, Haluska (2006) enthusiastically endorsed the formulaic essay as an all-purpose tool for the college student. He argues precisely what students in my freshman composition classes beg for, which is a technique that will serve them effectively from course to course and from one semester to the next. He acknowledges the potentially reductionist nature of quantifying aspects of composition (the five-paragraph theme, for instance), which inadvertently influences some student writers to limit rather than enlarge how they think about and develop their topics. An acceptable trade-off is an efficient and effective tool adaptable to writing assignments common to most college coursework.

V. Implications for Teaching and Learning.

Some will likely argue that advocating that students emulate each other's writing restricts rather than develops their abilities. Capping student development is far from the intention; instead, results of this study show that skillful use of student-authored essays may do just the opposite. This study indicates merit in placing greater emphasis on student-authored essays as a writing tool, as student writers, especially average and marginal ones, need accessible models that clearly reflect the rhetorical elements and skills they are expected to learn.

There are richer implications and lessons to take away from this study. First, the students' feedback suggests that either category of essay deserves more sophisticated handling as a teaching tool. The well-crafted student-authored essay, especially one that illustrates the flexibility and the adaptability of the so-called formula essay, can serve as an all-purpose writing tool that can handle most writing jobs adequately for the two-year or four-year college student. Broadly considered and taught well, the formula essay, as Haluska (2006) points out, is flexible yet muscular enough "to accommodate reading reactions, term papers, doctoral dissertations, letters home pleading for money, and so forth" (p. 51). Since students enter postsecondary institutions with the five-paragraph theme ingrained, it is reasonable to believe that an approach that can build upon what they already know offers some advantage. In other words, students who are unsure of themselves as writers find benefit in a recognized and repeatable approach.

Results from this study also imply that students consider peer-authored writing samples less intimidating; therefore, their own confidence as writers seems to receive a boost from exposure to writing by their peers. Notably, though, this same cohort shunned in-class activities built around peer critiquing and tended to distrust their peers' judgment of their writing. This seemed particularly true of better-prepared students whose reading and writing habits were advanced enough to discern the stylized ways in which accomplished writers use different techniques and rhetorical tools. Perhaps the general lesson to take away from this study is the need for more deliberate planning in the use of both student-authored and professional essays as teaching tools. Students in this study were more likely to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a student-authored essay because they accepted without question that an essay by a non-professional contained room for improvement.

On the opposite end, students in this study were more reticent in discussing strengths and weaknesses in professional essays. Some students reasoned that professional essays equated to perfection and that only exceptional examples would warrant inclusion in a textbook. To a degree, this sentiment applies as well to student-authored essays that appear as samples in the textbook. Therefore, it is worth noting that increased and more skillful use of student essays written by current and former students with no connection to professional documents may prove even more effective in achieving learning outcomes. To return to the general result of this study, the students surveyed preferred and benefitted more from the work of accomplished novice writers to that of professionals. The general implication may be that some students, especially those whose writing skills are marginal, find the work of their peers more recognizable and therefore more attainable in their own efforts.

VI. Limitations of Study.

Sample size and population profile limit widespread implications of the results. This study included a small sample size limited to first-semester freshmen at North Carolina A&T State University over two semesters. Though frequency counts of responses are notable, a close examination of the written comments provided more substantive and supportive data than anticipated. The nature of the written responses encourages follow up and refinement of the study design to include formal interviews that might provide greater insight into students' stated preferences for one type of essay sample over the other. As presented earlier, wide ranges of student preparedness and a voluntary system of placement in writing courses might also influence whether the results of this study can be generalized to other populations of students.

VII. Conclusion.

This small study aimed to validate the degree to which first-year students at a public HBCU find two categories of writing samples useful as teaching tools. Students in this study generally perceived professional essays as inaccessible and felt less capable of emulating professional models. As studies referenced in this paper show, professional writers often stylize their prose with techniques too advanced for the average and marginal writer to imitate with confidence. Participants in this study characterized the student-authored essay as a more accessible teaching tool than the professional essay model and judged it more representative of learning goals and writing techniques taught in class. Focused modeling of student-authored essays shows potential

for strengthening learning outcomes in first-year writing courses, especially for average and marginal writers.

References

Bauerlein, M. (2008). *The dumbest generation: How the digital age stupefies young Americans and jeopardizes our future (or, Don't trust anyone under 30)*. New York: Penguin.

Braddock, R. (1974). The frequency and placement of topic sentences in expository prose. *Research in the Teaching of English, 8* (3), 287-302.

Childress, V. and Southerland, J. (2008). *The status of student learning outcome achievement.* Greensboro, NC: North Carolina A&T State University.

Crew, L. (1987). Rhetorical beginnings: Professional and amateur. *College Composition and Communication, 38* (3), 346-350.

D'Angelo, F. J. (1986). The topic sentence revisited. *College Composition and Communication, 37* (4), 431-441.

Graves, J. L. (2006). *University Studies Program 2005-06 Annual Report*. Greensboro, NC: North Carolina A&T State University.

Haluska, J. C. (2006). In defense of the formula essay. *Academic Questions, 20* (1), 46-55.

Jenkins, R. (2010, February 21). Accordions, frogs, and the 5-paragaph theme. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/A-Return-to-the-5-Paragraph/64255/.

North Carolina A&T State University. (2010). *Fact Book 2010.* Greensboro, NC: North Carolina A&T State University. Retrieved from http://qed.ncat.edu/ir&p/availabl.htm.

Popken, R. L. (1987). A study of topic sentence use in academic writing. *Written Communication, 4* (2), 209-228.

Smith, C. G. (2008). Braddock revisited: The frequency and placement of topic sentences in expository prose. *The Reading Matrix, 8* (1), 78-95.

University of North Carolina. (2009). Fall 2008 average SAT of first-time freshmen. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina. Retrieved from fred.northcarolina.edu/quickfacts/Fall/sat086.pdf.