

Review

Thaiss, Chris, and Terry Myers Zawacki. *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 2006.

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Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life is an engaging study of academic writing. Based on three years of methodical research, the book offers insights into the ways in which postsecondary faculty across disciplines define, teach, assign, and evaluate “academic writing.” To gather material for the study, Thaiss and Zawacki interviewed faculty in fourteen disciplines, surveyed nearly two hundred students, conducted focus-group discussions with thirty-six students, used assessment results from twelve faculty workshops on writing-intensive courses, and acquired forty timed essays from undergraduate students—a rich array of data.

In Chapter One, “What’s Academic? What’s ‘Alternative’?,” Thaiss and Zawacki offer working definitions of “academic writing” and “alternative discourse.” Functionally defining the former as “any writing that fulfills a purpose of education in a college or university in the United States” (4), the authors provide examples illustrating that academic writing is more broadly construed than most scholars assume. Thaiss and Zawacki also offer three characteristics of academic writing that seem to be widely accepted across disciplines: “Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study” (5); “The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perceptions” (5); and “An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (7). Like other scholars, Thaiss and Zawacki acknowledge that emotions and the senses can occur in academic writing, but they “must always be subject to *control by reason*” (6) [emphasis in original].

The authors, like so many other writing scholars, are also interested in what constitutes alternative discourse. From their research, they posit that there are at least five means by which a writer can render discourse “alternative”: (1) “alternative formats,” (2) “alternative ways of conceptualizing and arranging academic arguments,” (3) “alternative syntaxes,” (4) “alternative methodologies,” and (5) “alternative media” (12). One motive for producing alternative discourse is to resist conventional discourse—a purpose commonly treated in feminist and cultural theory, and contrastive rhetorics. The first chapter also offers extended definitions of key terms that appear throughout the book: “discipline” and “genre.”

In Chapter Two, “Faculty Talk About Their Writing, Disciplines, and Alternatives,” Thaiss and Zawacki present data that remind us of some persistent issues in many scholarly discourse communities. For example, the faculty represented in the chapter feel pressure to write primarily or even exclusively for scholarly peers because writing for the general public is considered risky, especially for faculty struggling to earn tenure. Thaiss and Zawacki’s observations remind me of the influential work of Ernest Boyer, who, in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, argues that the full range of academic work—discovery, application, engagement, teaching and learning—needs to be considered scholarly if the academy is to serve society well. Their observation also reminds me of a perspective that I share whenever the opportunity arises. That is, the academy would serve itself well if each publishing scholar were to write one piece—book or article—for the general public for every ten pieces that he or she writes for peers. Further, each scholar should write at least one piece on teaching for every ten pieces that he or she writes. If we write only for our own scholarly discourse communities, we miss opportunities to convince the rest of the world that our work is valuable.

In Chapter Two Thaiss and Zawacki also note, as they do elsewhere in the book, that publishing scholars see the need for “objectivity in their academic disciplines” (38). This observation reminds us that some disciplines tenaciously persist in embracing the modernist view that objectivity is possible. Until I read Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in graduate school and many postmodernist perspectives thereafter, I also had thought that objectivity was possible in some fields. However, objectivity is about as elusive as Sasquatch.

In Chapter Three, “How Our Informants Teach Students to Write,” Thaiss and Zawacki describe a relatively wide range of assignments that faculty use to help students achieve established learning goals. The authors also posit that faculty members’ criteria for “good writing” are based on academic, disciplinary, subdisciplinary, local or institutional, and idiosyncratic

or personal perspectives. Further, faculty differ widely in their conscious awareness of the criteria that they use for judging the quality of writing. As Thaiss and Zawacki show, this variety of assignments and criteria often perplexes students, especially early in their college careers.

Chapter Four, “Students Talk About Expectations, Confidence, and How They Learn,” includes data gathered via surveys, focus-group interviews, and timed proficiency-exam essays. Thaiss and Zawacki report that, among other things, students at George Mason University write in response to a relatively wide range of assignments in their major courses, can articulate criteria for writing in their majors, and generally feel that they have freedom in choosing topics for writing. In response to the surveys, students indicated that the most common writing assignments are research-based papers, critiques, and summaries/abstracts/outlines.

As a result of their analyses of the student data, Thaiss and Zawacki hypothesize that students experience three stages of development as writers in a discipline. In the first stage, “the writer bases a sense of disciplinary consistency on writing experience in very few courses with criteria in these courses generalized into ‘rules’” (109). In the next stage, “the writer encounters different exigencies in different courses, and the sense of inconsistency, sometimes interpreted as teacher idiosyncrasy, supplants the perception of consistency” (110). In the third stage, “the writer understands the differences as components of an articulated, nuanced idea of the discipline” (110). Not surprisingly, Thaiss and Zawacki note that students learn to write more confidently and proficiently by writing frequently across a range of faculty and courses, by reflecting on their writing, by receiving feedback on early papers, and by studying models.

Chapter Five, “Implications for Teaching and Program Building” is an especially helpful chapter for faculty, particularly those who conduct workshops on writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines. In reflecting on their data, Thaiss and Zawacki describe some best practices for WAC/WID pedagogy. Although all twelve of Thaiss and Zawacki’s best practices are useful, I’ll note only several of them here—to avoid revealing too much about the story. They include the following: “Define expectations clearly and place them in the context of the discipline or in contexts meaningful to you” (142); “Provide students with contextualized feedback on their writing, especially early in a course” (147); “Give students opportunities for reflecting on their own growth as writers and rhetors, in the academy and as related to the workplaces they will enter” (152); and “Give students opportunities for exploring and understanding the variety of rhetorical environments they’ll encounter in college and the workplace” (154).

Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life is a valuable resource. Anyone who conducts workshops on writing across the curriculum or writing in the disciplines will find the book useful for several reasons. First, Thaiss and Zawacki offer insights into how faculty already conceptualize and implement writing in their disciplines. Second, in Chapter Five the authors provide practical strategies that faculty can use for assigning writing in a wide range of disciplines, including composition. In the many WAC/WID workshops that I conduct for faculty, I usually draw on John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, and I will continue to do so. However, I will now also encourage faculty to consider the practical, data-driven guidance that Thaiss and Zawacki offer.

I also plan to use the book the next time I have an opportunity to teach a graduate course on WAC/WID. Students in such a course could gain valuable insights into the discourse conventions of disciplines other than their own. I will encourage graduate students to engage in course research projects that replicate small parts of Thaiss and Zawacki's study. I also will encourage some students to consider dissertation projects that replicate larger chunks of the study. We need more studies like this to map the current national terrain of WAC, WID, and disciplinary discourse communities.

There is much discussion in the profession that we need more data-driven research to inform our practices and to support our arguments for teaching writing in diverse settings. *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life* represents one kind of study that can help teachers and administrators design more effective curricula and pedagogy in a wide range of courses. Thaiss and Zawacki put forth a model for others who want to conduct research that is both insightful and practical.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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