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Assessing Local Writing Cultures: Contrasting Student and Faculty Views on Writing in Three Discipline Groups

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Abstract: While, traditionally, the term “writing culture” has been used to characterize national or language-bound writing practices, today it is preferably applied in studies referring to smaller units like universities, disciplines, institutions or degree programs according to a suggestion of Holliday (1999). The study reported here, aimed at gaining an understanding of differences and commonalities of the local writing cultures in one particular university. The questionnaire used for this had been developed in several European-wide projects for cross-cultural research (Chitez et al., 2015) but is also sensitive to differences between disciplines. Results show a stable set of assumptions on academic writing which are equally accepted by students and faculty from all disciplines. There are also some marked differences between the humanities and the sciences. Students deviate from faculty not in their general preferences but in the degree to which they value certain textual qualities, particularly of academic language.

Reflection on the Relation to the IRC Colloquium

I was invited to the IRC colloquium by Tiane Donahue who participated in our COST action “Learning to Write Effectively.”¹ The format of this colloquium was unusual enough to raise my interest, and the opportunity of participating in an intercultural exchange on writing research was something I would not have liked to miss. It also was kind of uncommon to present a

1 Please read the opening statement for this collection, “Editing in US-Based International Publications: A Position Statement,” before reading this chapter.

research project before it had started but this still offered me the opportunity to check the strategy and methodology of my project. There were several questions and remarks after the presentation and what I remember was one participant being amazed about the overly complex arrangement we had chosen for this study. This remark escorted me throughout the lifetime of this project and I am still wondering whether it was justified or not. Can there be intercultural research on writing or genre which is not overly complex? We finally did successfully finish the project and published some results from it (Chitez & Kruse, 2019). What made the project really difficult were the comparisons of genres across languages, a task that is rarely done and I know now why. Our overall finding was that writing cultures in Switzerland follow a national pattern rather than one determined by the three languages French, German, and Italian (with their respective background cultures) involved.

Anyway, the encounter with researchers and projects from all over the world was a good opportunity for me to adjust for my Europe-centred point of view on intercultural aspects of writing to a more global one. Dealing with some 50+ countries and as many languages in Europe, there is not much capacity left to keep an eye on the differences within the Americas or the Asian and Pacific countries, not to speak of the interactions between them. Still, the colloquium sensitized me for the problems of carrying out research in other parts of the world, some of them less privileged with regard to research funding as compared to the Anglophone or Western European countries. As we learned at that time, similar differences existed between Western and Eastern Europe to which we had to adjust in international projects. The long seclusion from international discourses and the orientation towards Russian sciences had resulted in a loss of adaptation to research standards in spite of high intellectual capacities. See the selected collection of Chitez et al. (2018) for more details on this.

As much as the colloquium itself, was the CCC Conference a fruitful lecture on intercultural differences in writing research. As there is no discipline like rhetoric/composition anywhere else in the world, I was amazed by the kinds of discourses going on which differed markedly from what I was used to from our European societies such as EATAW (European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing), EARLI (European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction) or the Swiss Forum for Academic Writing. When it comes to research, however, the differences between cultures disappear widely. The logic of research is very much the same everywhere in the world and the need to publish in English additionally levels academic communication about research. The opportunity to reflect on this, as the IRC colloquium offers, is certainly a good addition to the usual routines of research

exchanges. I am convinced that exchanges between countries with more and with less resources for research have to be actively sought and arranged as the established publication and conference routines often exclude those who do not have the respective means available.

Institutional Context

The institutional background of my work is a Swiss University of Applied Sciences, a university format focussing on applied disciplines such as architecture, engineering, or life sciences. My School of Applied Linguistics hosts degree programs such as translation, journalism and cultural integration. Not long before the IRC workshop, I had moved from monolingual Germany to multilingual Switzerland (German, French, Italian, and Romansh as national languages) and got interested in the opportunities such an intercultural context would offer for the study of writing. At that time, I was teaching in a study program of translation, and had to develop a two-semester writing program in three languages (German, Italian, French) to introduce the translation students into writing in their first languages. For this, I had to negotiate with teachers from Germany, France, Italy (or from the respective Swiss language regions) on how to introduce students to such language practices as narration, argumentation, reporting, commenting and so on (see Kruse, 2012, for details). This task made me aware that a comment or report is not the same in each of these languages. Still, there was enough common ground on which to find lines of teaching applying to all of them.

From this experience came the idea of doing a comparative study in the main language regions of Switzerland to see how writing cultures differ. Amazingly, almost nothing was known about such differences. At that time, I participated in the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action “Learning to write effectively”, with over 80 researchers involved. COST is a funding scheme maintained by more than 40 European countries supporting large-scale projects devoted to research exchanges across Europe. I was coordinating a working group on genre. Additionally, I had received a grant for a project called “Writing culture as a mobility factor” which intended to find out to what extent differences in writing cultures prevent student mobility in Switzerland and Europe. It was planned to select three similar study programs in the three main language parts of Switzerland and compare their genres and genre practices. English was used as a reference language. The methods we wanted to apply were questionnaires for students and faculty, interviews as well as focus groups. This was the project I presented at the IRC (International Researchers Consortium) colloquium.

The study reported in this contribution is a follow-up to this earlier research drawing on the questionnaire methodology but using it in the setting of a single university.

Background of the Study

“Culture” is a fundamental term for all humanities and social sciences, pointing at what seems to be essential about communities or societies. Cultures, as is commonly assumed, grow historically and govern social units in a supra-individual way. Culture may refer to phenomena as different as intellectual properties, customs, rituals, educatedness, ideals, values, artefacts, literacy, and patterns of social relations. Holliday (1999) criticised such a use of the term when applied to large groups like nations, language communities or ethnicities, for its tendency to produce stereotypes which are then naturalized and possibly institutionalized. Differences between cultures are overgeneralized by this and the respective communities are “otherised.” The “small culture” paradigm for research in applied linguistics that Holliday (1999) proposes instead, tries to avoid essentialist, prescriptive, and normative attributions to nations, languages or ethnicities. To Holliday, small cultures studies may apply to all kinds of groups that are connected by any kind of cohesive behaviour.

A *small-culture approach* has been adopted as a frame for this study, too, even though the origin of this research line has been rooted in the search for national differences as an approach to understand European writing cultures (Chitez & Kruse, 2012). Even though a historical view on writing does lead to interesting results (for instance, Russell & Foster, 2002) it should not be tied to the assumption that writing cultures are fixed to nations or languages, as the pioneers of intercultural writing research like Robert Kaplan (1966) or Michael Clyne (1987) had done. Rather, writing cultures should be related to smaller organizational units and explained by particular educational policies and practices such as patterns of disciplinary specialization, career patterns, examination and selection processes, university types or the transition processes between educational levels, as Russell and Foster (2002) proposed. In European studies, it turned out that processes of internationalization and shared educational programs of the European Union exerted a strong pressure on unifying teaching and writing practices (Chitez et al., 2018) thus superimposing any tradition that may have governed past practices. Today, cultural diversity and heterogeneity in writing are much better-grounded theoretically and are more common as access point to the study of cultural differences than it had been at the time when intercultural writing research started (Donahue, 2016, 2018b).

Writing cultures are defined, here, as integrated and relatively stable patterns of writing practices, genres and attitudes towards writing that may have emerged in a particular geographical, institutional or functional context. They are not fixed forever but may change whenever they get in contact to other writing cultures, be it within an institution, in national or in international contexts of higher education. Such contacts may permit or enforce adaptation to new procedures, practices or conventions.

To arrive at an operational definition of the term “writing culture”, a multilingual questionnaire had been developed in several steps and adapted to the varying realities of European universities including translations into six languages (overview: Chitez et al., 2015). The questionnaire had been designed by an international group of researchers with the aim of providing a measurement tool sensible to differences between various kinds of writing cultures, including disciplines. The core issues of writing cultures as defined by the questionnaire, were the following:

- *Writing practices:* What is writing used for in study programs? This refers to the connections of student writing to learning, grading, selection, and graduation.
- *Languages used:* Which are the languages used for writing? How much English is involved? Are linguistic minority languages included?
- *Genres used as writing assignments:* Is there agreement on which genres are in use and how genres are related to writing practices and disciplinary learning? Are genres defined in any way?
- *Beliefs about “good writing”:* What expectations do faculty have on good papers and good uses of writing? What do students assume about the expectations their teachers have about writing?
- *Writing skills:* What skills are necessary, desired and factually developed? How are skills developed or passed on? Is this seen as a collective educational task or left to the students’ own initiatives?
- *Desired support:* What kind of support do students receive and what is missing? What would they consider helpful additionally?

What actually forms a writing culture are not only the characteristics within each of these dimensions but also the interrelatedness between them. Stability of such writing cultures results from the fact that, for instance, beliefs are connected to practices, genres to skills, and expectations from faculty to the tutoring strategies of the local writing centre. Additionally, each study program may have detailed specifications of the uses of written exams and will offer guidelines for theses and dissertations. Similarly, state or national legislation may provide a frame for the use of written exams and theses.

This contribution focuses on a selected set of data from a study on the undergraduate degree programs of one particular university in Germany and will focus on three issues: Beliefs about good writing, self-reported and attributed writing/study skills, and desired support for writing. The three faculty groups of the university allow for comparisons between sciences, humanities and politics plus economy. As faculty and students were asked similar questions, a comparison between their views on some issues was possible. Also, comparisons between first-year and third-year students could be done.

Student beliefs about writing are seen as important cognitive units regulating writing performance. They can be related to the writer's self-efficacy (Mateos et al. 2011; Sanders-Reio et al., 2014) or writers' assumption about the writing process (White & Bruning, 2005). Baaijen et al. (2014) see it related to assumptions about text quality and discovery through writing. Another source of beliefs results from the research tradition of epistemic development (Hofer & Pintrich, 1977; Perry, 1999) which sees the students' assumptions about truth, knowledge, and thought as important factors of intellectual development. Epistemic beliefs and writing cultures are closely related within disciplinary contexts as studies by Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee (1987) Barbara Walvoord and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy (1990) and Mya Poe et al. (2010) have demonstrated.

Writing competences were measured by scales asking for the self-assessment of skills relevant for academic writing. As differentiations between the terms "skills" and "competences" vary across disciplines and continents, we used the terms synonymously. Academic writing is not a unitary skill but has to be seen as a complex competence composed of many different sub-skills, each of them rooted in a different part of academic practice (Horstmannshof & Brownie, 2013, 2016; Petric, 2002). Kruse (2013) mentions connections of writing competence to

- Disciplinary knowledge construction which may be related to disciplinary epistemologies, theories, and research methods
- Writing processes, and procedural skills, such as planning, literature searches, structuring, and revision
- Discourse patterns, such as understanding audience, author roles, and communication practices
- Media use, such as making use of word processors, search engines and other digital support measures for writers
- Genre knowledge and genre awareness, such as understanding the differences between essays, seminar papers, research articles, etc.

- Linguistic skills, such as spelling, grammar, and rhetorical means like hedging, metadiscourse, intertextuality, and self-reference.

The scales of the European Writing Survey reflect these issues (except “media use”) and ask students about their confidence in several relevant competence fields. Faculty were asked how important they felt these competence fields to be for student writing. To be able to contrast student self-perceived skills with faculty views, faculty additionally were asked to which degree they think their students are skilled.

The overarching research question of the study was: How can we characterize the writing culture(s) of one particular university as measured by the European Writing Survey? The aim was to provide data that can be used to open a dialogue across disciplines within the university and between universities. Responses from 438 undergraduate students of the Bachelor’s degree programs and from 144 faculty were included in the evaluation. A full account of all data can be found in Kruse et al. (2015).

Methods

Data collection took place in the University of Constance, a publicly funded institution located in the South-west of Germany, which was founded in 1966 as a reform university. It had, at the time studied, roughly 12.000 students and 100 degree programs. It has not organized its departments and institutes in traditional faculties as is common in Germany but in three large discipline groups, called “sections.” The organization in three sections covered:

- *Mathematics and sciences (further referred to as “sciences”)*: Mathematics and statistics, computer sciences, physics, chemistry, biology and psychology
- *Humanities (“humanities”)*: Philosophy, history, sociology, education, literature, arts, and media studies
- *Politics, economy and law (“pol+econ”)*: Politics and administration studies, economics, and law, from which the law institution was excluded and studied separately.

Sampling: The university maintains five different types of degree programs. Next to the Bachelor’s, Master’s and doctoral programs, there are two state exam degrees, one for law and one for teachers’ education. State exam programs involve government officials in exams and degree program committees. Because of differences in lengths and exam structures, these programs were not included in the evaluation. Also, master programs and doctoral

studies were excluded in order to have a homogeneous sample of Bachelor's degrees only. To make comparisons easier to interpret, we also excluded the law students (and faculty) from the third group (pol+econ) and evaluated them separately. Writing assignments and language education in law schools differ in several respects those from the social sciences (Kruse, 2016b) so that an exclusion seemed justified.

Questionnaire: The measurement tool was the European Writing Survey which had been developed and applied in several intercultural contexts (Chitez et al., 2015). The questionnaire exists in a faculty and a student version which both cover similar topics and in some scales are parallelized, so that student and faculty answers can be compared. It was administered in a bilingual German/English version with content-identical, but culturally adapted questions.

The questionnaire hosts several scales to assess different aspects of writing cultures (overview, see Table 1). Different variations of five-point Likert scales were used; all of them with a "medium" or "average" or "neutral" scale value in the middle from which two lower and two higher values were defined. For scales in which most items were of high value for the respondents, the medium scale value was called "average importance." while two answers for "of less importance" and two "of more importance" were offered. For the statistical evaluations, added values of the two highest or the two lowest scores were used. Means, standard deviations, and statistical significance were not calculated as the scale level of Likert scales does not support such statistics.

Data collection: Questionnaires were sent out in a digital form to all students and all faculty of the University. All of them received two reminders if questionnaires were not returned. The return rate for students was 8.15%, for faculty 13.49%. Numbers of the student responses in the bachelor programs were distributed unequally across the sections, sciences: N=95, humanities: N=241, and pol+econ N=103. Average age was between 22 and 23 years for each of the three student groups. Gender distribution was unbalanced with 34.9% male and 65.1% female across all three groups. This imbalance was due to the different gender representations in the sciences and the humanities where the percentage of males was 61.1% in the sciences, 21.2 in the humanities and 43.1 in the pol+econ group. As this roughly represents the overall gender distribution in these disciplines, we did not correct for gender as we see culture not as an abstract trait but as one that connects to a certain group with a certain gender proportion. If the group culture is determined by an overrepresentation of males or females, then we should not change that by adjusting the sample for gender. 94.7% of the sample reported German as their first language and the average number of semesters studied was 7 for the science group and 6 for the two others.

Table 3.1. Selection of Scales of the Writing Survey (Chitez, Kruse, & Costelló, 2015) with Questions and Answer Categories

Nr.	Student scales	Nr.	Faculty scales
1	Competences in academic writing: “Please indicate how confident you feel in mastering these competences?” Answer categories: not at all confident, not very confident, so-so, rather confident, confident	1	Importance of competences in academic writing: “When your students write a paper or a thesis in your discipline, what is particularly important to you?” Answer categories: Five-point scale: of less importance (-2), of average importance (0), of more importance (+2)
2	“Good writing”: “What are the characteristics of ‘good writing’ in your discipline? Please indicate how important you consider the following characteristics.” Five-point scale: of less importance (-2), of average importance (0), of more importance (+2)	2	“Good writing”: “What are the characteristics of ‘good writing’ in your view? Please indicate how important you consider the following characteristics.” Answer categories: Five-point scale: of less importance (-2), of average importance (0), of more importance (+2)
3	Self-evaluation of study competences: “Below you will find a list of study competences. Please indicate how confident you feel in each of them.” Answer categories: not at all confident, not very confident, so-so, rather confident, confident	3	Evaluation of study competences: “From your experience, how competent are your students in these study competences?” Answer categories: not competent, rather not competent, so-so, rather competent, very competent
	Writing support: “How could instructions for writing during your studies be improved?” Please indicate to what extent you consider the following suggestions helpful: Answer categories: Five-point scale: not at all helpful; rather not helpful; so-so; rather helpful; very helpful.	4	Importance of study competences: “How important do you consider the following didactic elements for the teaching and learning in your classes?” Answer categories: Five-point scale: of less importance (-2), of average importance (0), of more importance (+2)

From the 144 faculty who returned the questionnaire, 64.6% were male, 33.4 female. 88.2% reported German as their first language. The distribution to the three sections sciences, humanities and pol+econ was N=46, N=61, and N=37 respectively.

Data processing: Data was evaluated qualitatively along the answer categories without calculating means and standard deviations, as scale levels did not allow for such measures. Significance tests were not carried out for the same reason.

Results

Faculty Beliefs about Good Writing

Figure 3.1 presents the answers of faculty to the question “What are the characteristics of ‘good writing’ in your view?” The scale consists of 12 items with answer categories in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very important to very unimportant. Results reveal a relatively high agreement of seven key features which all scored above 90% as “important” or “very important.” These were: *Objectivity, basing the text on sources, clear thematic structure, convincing arguments, terminological accuracy, critical thinking, and supporting arguments with evidence.* These values, we may conclude, form the core of academic writing across all disciplines of this university. We will see, however, that only five of them apply to all disciplines and are valued equally by students.

There is a large difference of about 25 percentage points to the next-highest characteristics *creative ideas* and *simple language* which both fall behind with short of 60% each and an even larger difference of more than 50% to, *avoidance of first person* and *elegant language* (both scoring slightly above the 30%.) *Figurative language* seems to be the only characteristic that does not bear relevance for academic writing.

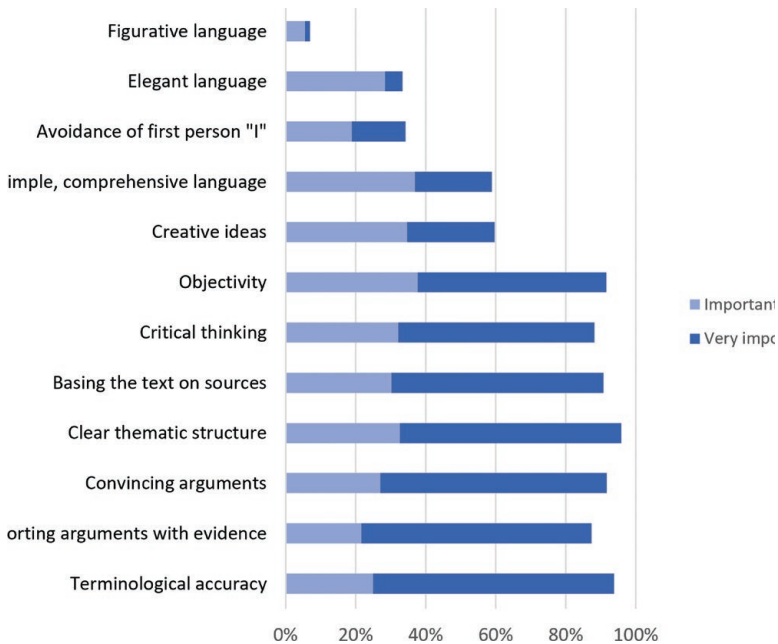


Figure 3.1. Faculty responses: “What are the characteristics of ‘good writing’ in your view?”

There are some differences when the disciplinary sections are compared. Figure 3.2 shows that only 5 basic values of academic writing score high in all three faculty groups while two of them seem to be valued unequally. *Critical thinking*, as one of them, receives a score of 98% within the Humanities—which makes this clearly a core feature of these disciplines—but scores about 15–20 percentage points lower in both of the other discipline groups. Even if we can assume that critical thinking is a fundamental value for all universities, today, it obviously plays a different role and asks for a different consideration in the disciplines. This also applies to the value of *convincing arguments* where the humanities score 96% and the pol+econ disciplines 94% while in the sciences it reaches only 82%. To account for these differences, it seems justified to speak of the big 5 factors (*objectivity, basing the text on sources, clear thematic structure, terminological accuracy, and supporting arguments with evidence*), which are accompanied by two important but not equally highly valued factors (*convincing arguments, critical thinking*). Taken together, it seems justified to speak of a 5+2 core value structure.

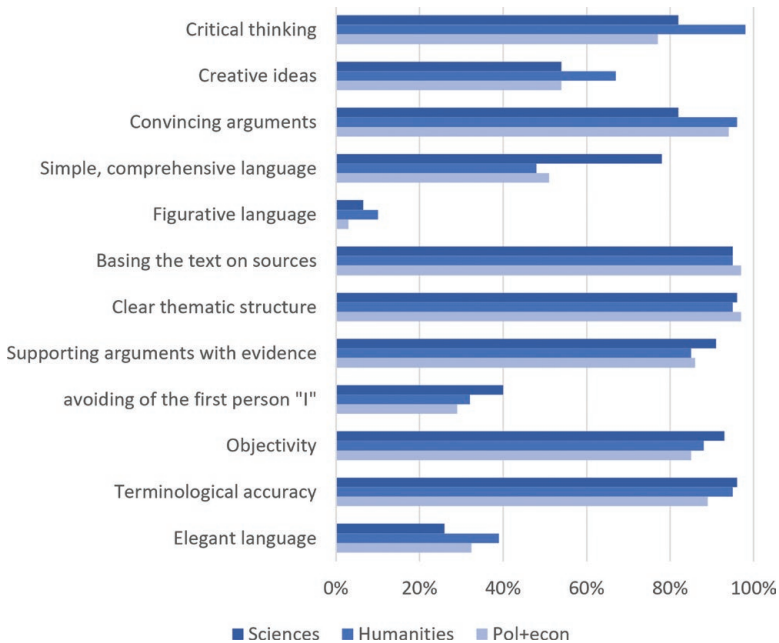


Figure 3.2. Faculty responses across discipline groups: "What are the characteristics of 'good writing' in your view?" Percentages of answer categories "important" plus "very important"

There is one linguistic item, *simple comprehensive language*, where the sciences score 30 percentage points higher than both other groups. Obviously, the plain style as suggested as a linguistic ideal for the sciences by Thomas Sprat in 1667 is still alive. The humanities, in turn, score somewhat higher on *elegant language* (38%) than the sciences (26%) and the pol+econ disciplines (32%). Stylish writing, as Sword (2012) has pointed out, should not be neglected altogether as a value in academic writing, even if it may seem marginal compared to the 5+2 core values. We may add that *creative ideas*, which are only of medium importance, score somewhat higher in the humanities section than in the other two.

Student Beliefs about Good Writing

What do students say to the values under study? When we look at the student evaluations (Figure 3.3), we see a similar picture as with the faculty. The five plus two outstanding values dominate the picture here, too, but with some deviances. Additionally, the differences between the discipline groups have a similar profile as with the faculty, but absolute values differ considerably.

Critical thinking is not of equal importance for the students as for the faculty but the differences between the disciplines remain the same with only 50% of the science students considering it important. *Creative thought* is more valued by the humanities students than by the two other groups and *elegant language* is fairly highly (around 50%) cherished by the humanities and pol+econ students but not by the science students. The importance of *convincing arguments* is seen much lower by the science students than by the two other groups. Less than 50% of the science students seem to value *convincing arguments* as part of research writing.

When comparing faculty and students across all sections (Figure 3.4), some commonalities and differences become obvious. Students are in line with their faculty in the “big five” of academic writing: *relying on sources*, *clear thematic structure*, *relying on facts*, *objectivity* and *terminological accuracy*. They are markedly less convinced of the importance of *critical thinking*, *creative thought*, and *convincing arguments* as important values and stay consistently 10 to 25 percentage points behind their teachers. In the language-related items, they overemphasize *elegant language* and *avoidance of first person (“I”)* while they place less emphasis on the ideal of using a *simple, comprehensive language*. It seems that, here, is a wide field for language instruction to adjust these value differences and help avoid misunderstandings as to what kind of a research language is expected. Particularly, the faculty’s low importance given to the avoidance of direct self-reference contrasts to the student belief that the use of “I” is not appropriate.

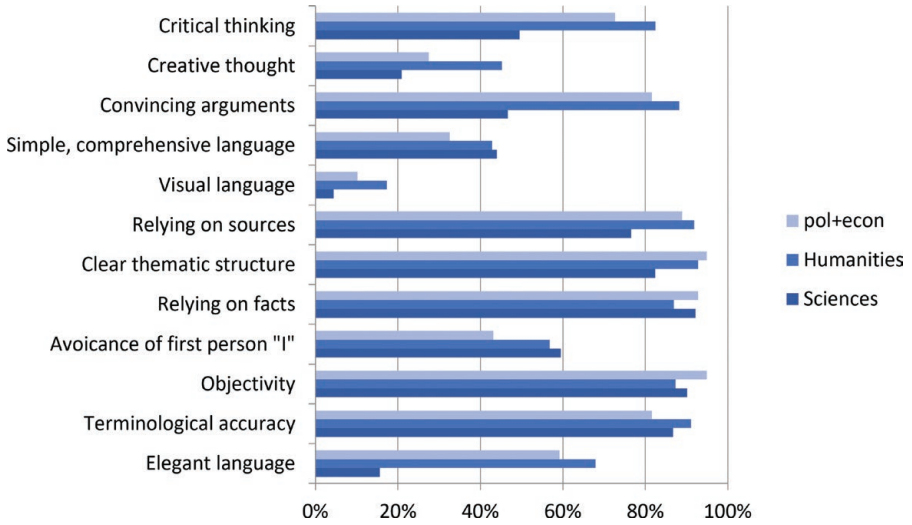


Figure 3.3. Student responses across disciplines: "What are the characteristics of 'good writing' in your discipline?"

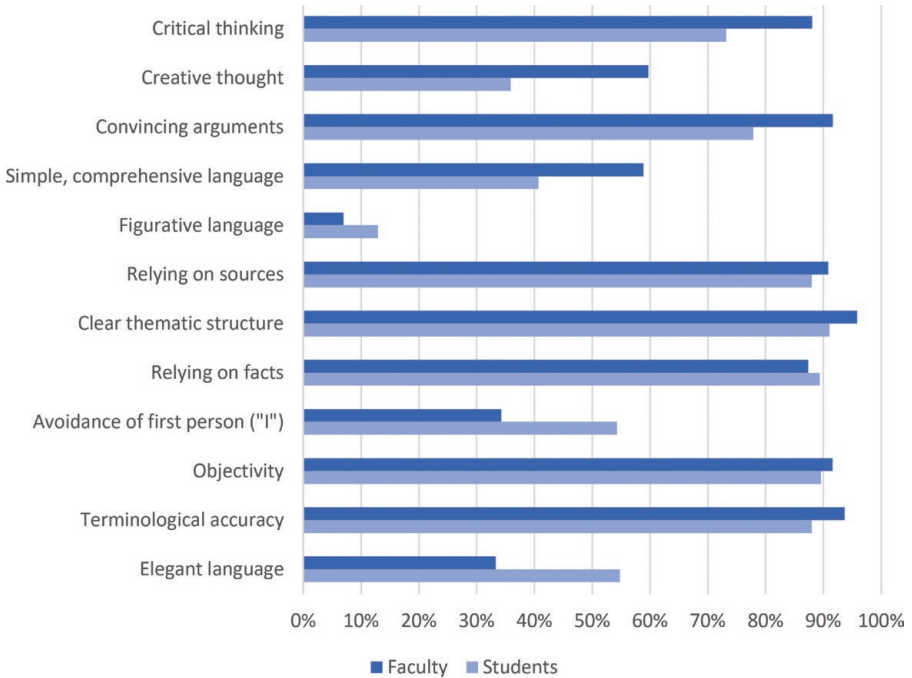


Figure 3.4. Student vs. faculty responses: Characteristics of "good writing."

Self-perceived Student Writing Skills

To learn more about the view students have on their writing skills, we asked them to indicate how competent they felt in several subskills of writing (Figure 3.5). They received a list with 21 skills that may be ascribed to academic writing. No item of this scale exceeds the 70% mark and only 8 of them touch the 50% mark. It is hard to say whether this is a relatively high or a low level as this would ask for comparable data from other writing cultures. *Revision for linguistic correctness* and *writing of a bibliography* are the top scorers, along with *using the right terminology* and *supporting one's own point of view*.

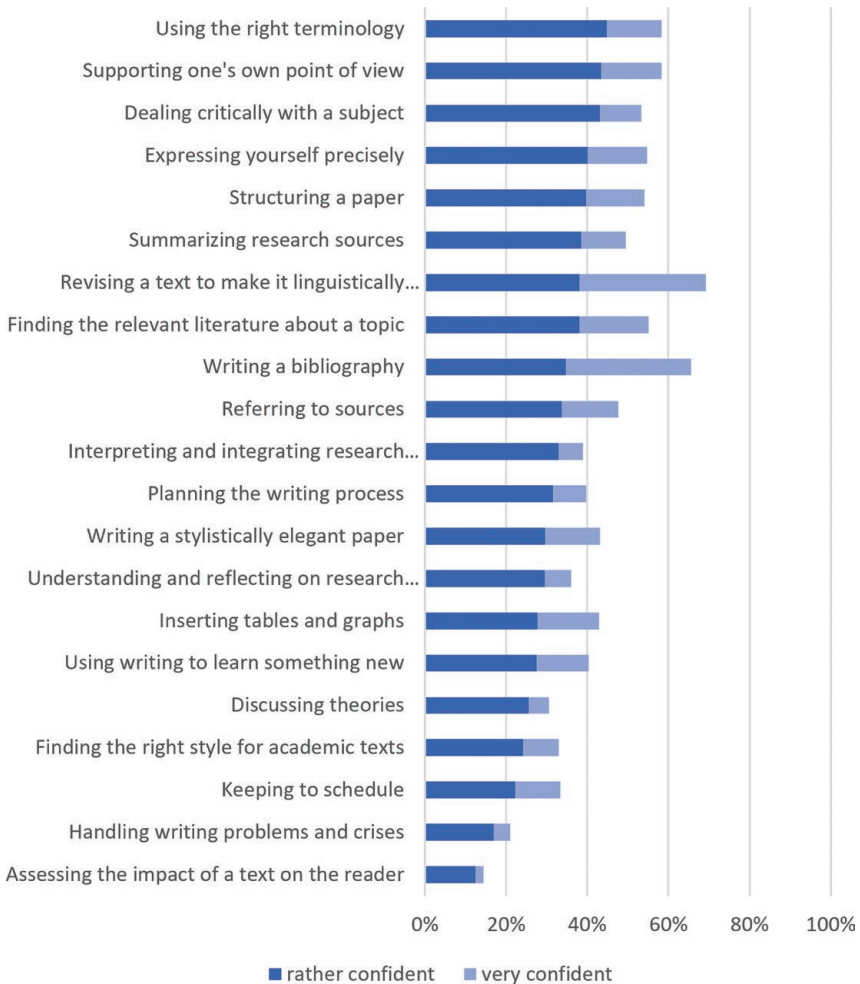


Figure 3.5. Student responses: "Please indicate how confident you feel in mastering these competences."

On the lower end of the scale, there are some issues where students unanimously report a lack of confidence in skills such as *assessing the impact of a text on the audience* and *handling writing problems and crises*. Along with *keeping to schedule*, these results point at problems with mastering the writing processes. All in all, it seems as if the research-related items about research methods, *literature searches*, *dealing critically with a subject*, using the right terminology and *summarizing research sources* are more familiar to them than the skills referring to mastering the writing process. Noteworthy, that formal aspects like *referring to sources* and *inserting tables and graphs* do not reach the 50% mark.

Faculty also received the list of 21 items on writing stills, but were asked for their evaluation of the importance of these skills for successful student writing (Figure 3.6).

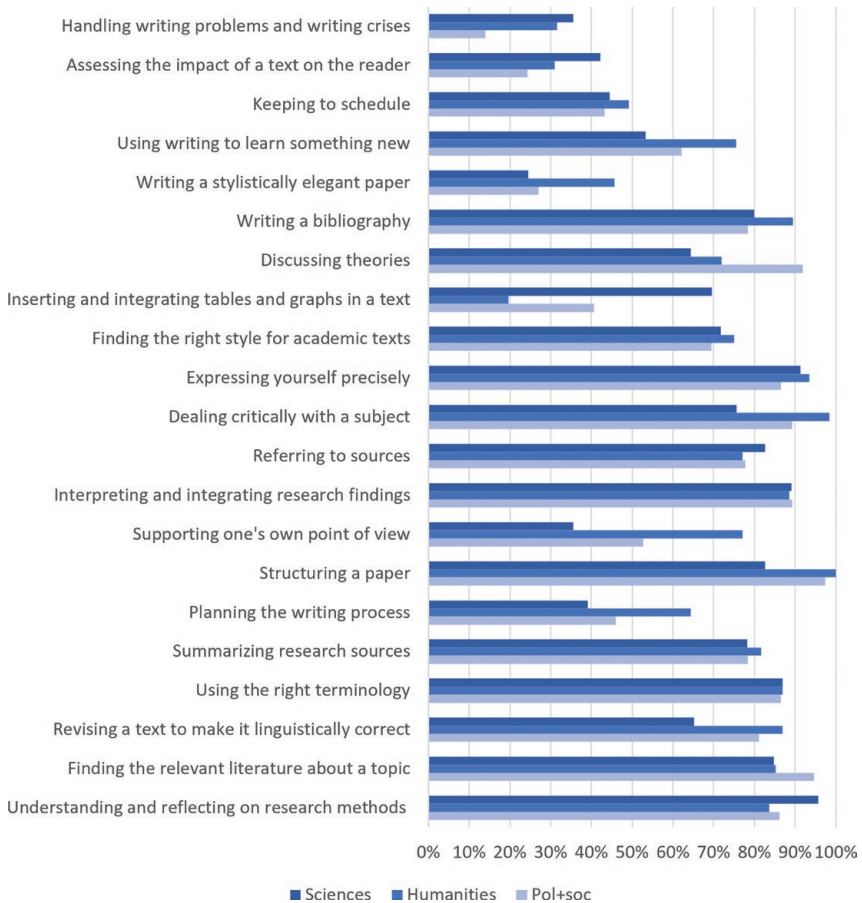


Figure 3.6. Faculty's evaluation: When students write a paper, what is particularly important to you?

We believe that such evaluations tell us something about the mindset of the teachers of this university and may be related to the confidence students assign themselves in the same skills.

Figure 3.6 shows the faculty evaluations of the importance of writing skills broken down for the three discipline groups. Evaluations of the importance of the writing process and linguistic issues scored, again, clearly lower, indicating different priorities of the faculty.

There were some differences among the faculty responses to the importance of the students' writing skills, which are worth being reported in single diagrams (Figure 3.7–3.9).

Figure 3.7 shows that *supporting one's own point of view* in student papers is only of medium importance, even in the humanities (77%) and clearly below average importance to the sciences (35%) while the pol+econ disciplines scored in the middle (53%). *Critical thinking* (Figure 3.8) has been addressed with a slightly different wording of *dealing with a subject critically* but received similar results as the *critical thinking* item in the good writing set of questions (Figure 3.3 and 3.4) with an almost 98% score from the humanities and about 10 percentage points less in the pol+econ and 20 points less in the sciences disciplines.

There was, finally, one issue where the pol+econ disciplines did not hold the middle place but scored highest (Figure 3.9). This was the question on *discussing theories*, an item which less than 70% of respondents from the sciences and humanities found of high or very high importance but more than 90% of the political sciences and economy. Theory seems of to be a particularly high value for the constitution of knowledge in these disciplines as compared to the others.

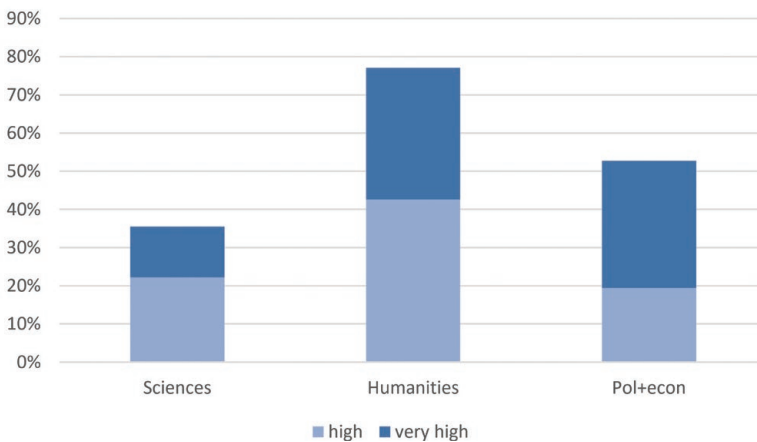


Figure 3.7. Faculty responses: "When your students write a paper or a thesis in your discipline, what is particularly important to you?"

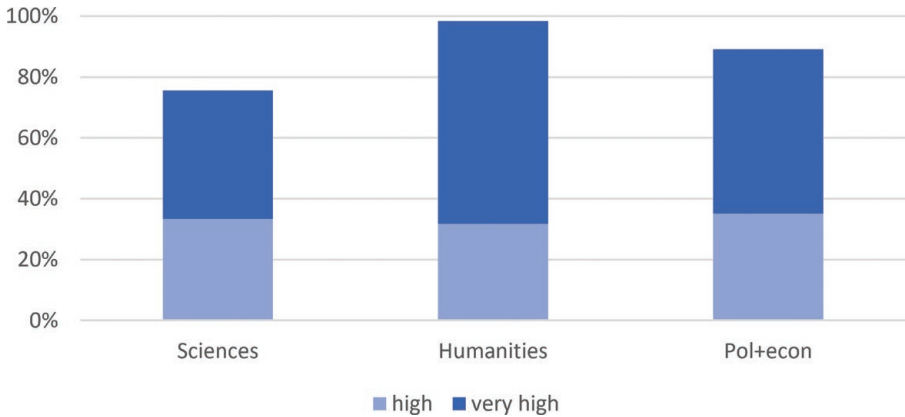


Figure 3.8. Faculty responses: "When your students write a paper or a thesis in your discipline, what is particularly important to you?"

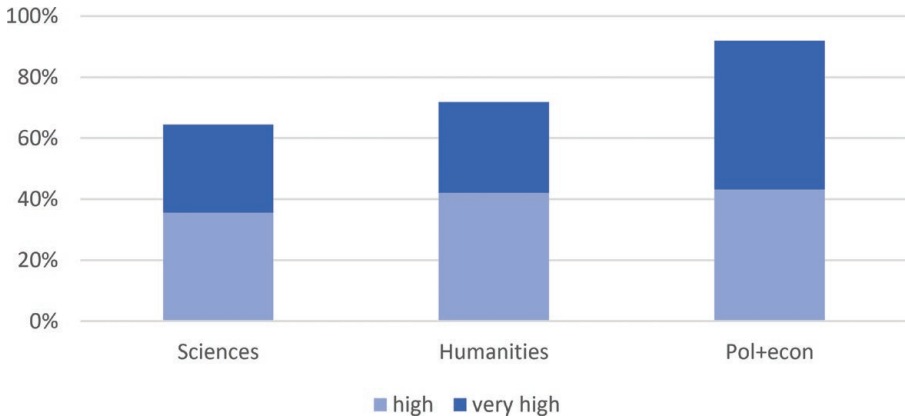


Figure 3.9. Faculty responses: "When your students write a paper or a thesis in your discipline, what is particularly important to you?"

Comparisons of Student and Faculty Evaluations of Study Skills

To better anchor the evaluation of writing competences, we included a scale comparing writing with other relevant study competences and activities. The questionnaire asked students to rate their study skills on the level of confidence. Faculty were asked to rate the general level of confidence in study skills of their students and also how important they consider these skills for student learning. Table 3.2 shows the data for both faculty evaluations of importance and skills level as well as for the students' self-evaluations asking for their confidence to master these skills.

Table 3.2: Comparison Faculty and Student Responses on Study Skills

	Faculty: How important do you consider the following elements in your classes? Percentages of “higher than average”	Faculty: How competent are your students in these fields? Percentages of “rather competent” plus “very competent”	Students: How confident do you feel with each of these skills? Percentages of “feel confident” plus “feel very confident”
Note-taking during lessons	27.3	35.9	57.8
Reading and understanding academic texts	89.3	36.5	75.7
Academic writing	78.4	17.9	45.7
Using information technology	36.4	53.6	50.9
Preparing exams efficiently	46.7	30.9	47.9
Organizing group work efficiently	53.9	39.4	33.9
Giving an oral presentation	78.5	44.6	41.3

What faculty consider most important in their classes is *reading and understanding academic text* (89%) along with *academic writing* (78%) and *oral presentations* (78%). Writing, here, has not the top place but scores at the same level as oral presentations skills only. *Information technology* (today we would probably call this “digital skills”) were rated markedly lower (53.0%) as was true for *preparing for exams* (46.7%) and *note taking* (27.3%).

When asked to assess the competence level of their students for each of the study skills (Table 3.2, centre column), faculty ascribed the skills of *academic writing* by far the lowest value with only 17.9% indicating that only very few of their students are competent above average. Faculty obviously do not have much confidence in their students’ writing skills. This contrasts markedly to the 53.6% of the faculty assigning their students high competence in *using information technology* which gained the highest level of all answers to student skills.

Faculty’s low value (17.9%) for writing skills contrasts to the 45.7% which the students assign themselves. There is obviously a mismatch in self-assessment and third-party assessment of writing skills. In general, students rated

their study competences in literacy skills (except for the presentation skills) consistently higher than their faculty. Faculty rated student skills higher in *using information technology, organizing group work* and *giving oral presentations* than the students rated themselves.

To further explore how the faculty's low values for the students' writing skills can be explained, we looked at the differences between the discipline groups. Figure 3.10 shows that the main impact on the differences between self- and faculty evaluation comes from the humanities disciplines. Here, the contrast between self- and faculty evaluation is highest compared to the other two discipline groups. In the humanity disciplines, students evaluate their confidence in writing highest while faculty evaluate student skills as lowest. In both remaining discipline groups, differences are smaller even if here, too, self-evaluations are higher than faculty evaluations.

It should be noted that a comparison between "competence" (faculty) and "confidence" (students) has to be treated with caution as they are not identical measures and refer to different conceptualizations of skills. It may be argued, however, that the contrasts between the values allow for tentative interpretations, particularly if not absolute measures but rather the relations between values are considered.

There are some clear differences between the faculty from the three discipline groups with respect to their opinions on the study skills of their students. Figure 3.11 shows the faculty's evaluations of students' study competences broken down for the three discipline groups. It can be seen that there are fairly large differences particularly between the sciences group and the other two. In all literacy dimensions (except *giving an oral presentation*), faculty from the science disciplines evaluate their students consistently better than the other two groups, while the humanities seem to be the most critical, when it comes to an evaluation of the academic reading and writing skills of their students.

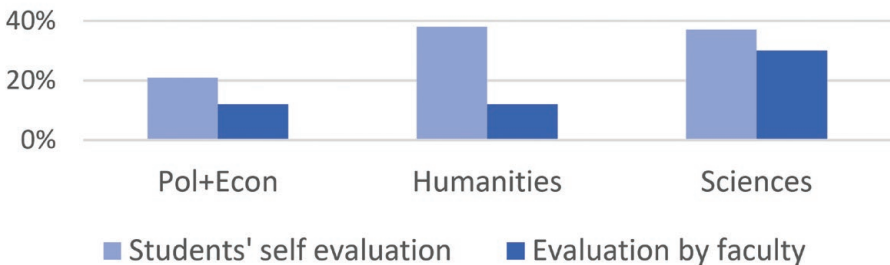


Figure 3.10. Comparison of evaluation of students' answers to "How confident are you in writing skills?" vs. faculty's answers to "How competent are your students in writing skills?"

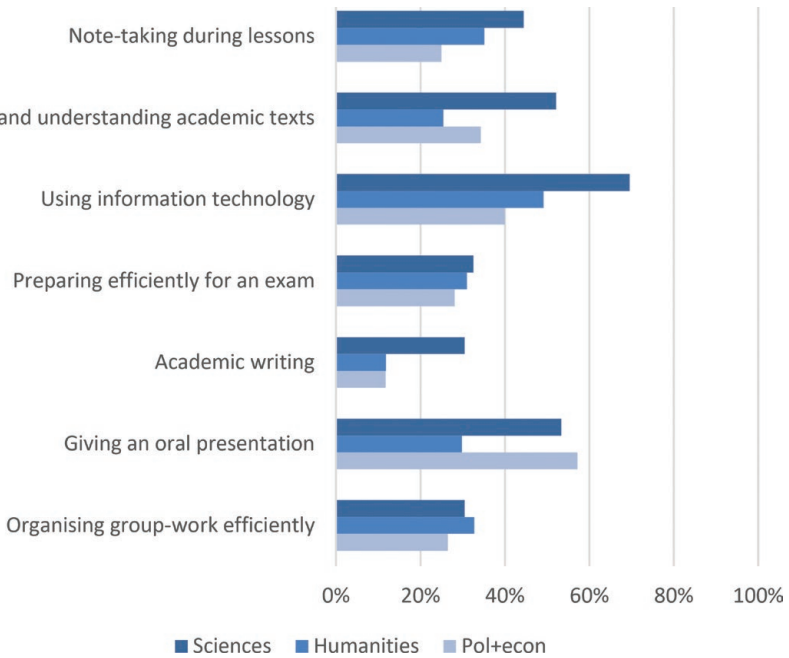


Figure 3.11. Faculty responses: Study competences across discipline groups (“from your experience, how competent are your students in the respective competence?”).

Skills Development

Figure 3.12 compares first-year with third-year students to evaluate what kinds of development in the study programs might take place. Although the study produced no longitudinal but only cross-sectional data, we interpreted higher values in student self-evaluation in the third as compared to the first year as “gain.” There was almost no gain in confidence from first- to third-year students *in taking notes, organizing group work, and discussing in class* but rather large gains in items referring to language use, such as *reading and understanding texts, presenting in public, and academic writing*. Also, gains *in using information technology and preparing for exams* are clearly visible. The largest gain from 18% to 48% concerns *academic writing* and indicates that writing, at this university, receives enough attention to provide appropriate learning opportunities for the students. For a cross-check we also looked at the number of students rating their academic writing as “rather not confident” or “not confident” and here the data shows a reduction from 44% to 24% between first and third year. Although this is a substantial gain in confidence,

it indicates that almost a quarter of the students still feel not confident in academic writing at the end of the undergraduate program, which still is a good justification for an investment into a writing centre.

As a final point, students were asked which kind of support for writing they would appreciate (Figure 3.13). There were six different support measures which they could rate along their assumed helpfulness. All of them received support from more than 50% of the respondents. *More feedback* scores highest, next to *better instructions for my existing courses and online support for my writing*. New offers in form of *training courses* or *more writing in existing courses* score lowest. Still, all offers received Support by more than 50% of the respondents.

It should be noticed that the evaluations differed between the discipline groups. Students from the science disciplines rated all offers markedly lower than students from the other sections. But better instructions and more feedback remain the highest values also from them. Still, the role of writing in the STEM disciplines as well as the nature of writing instruction need further exploration.

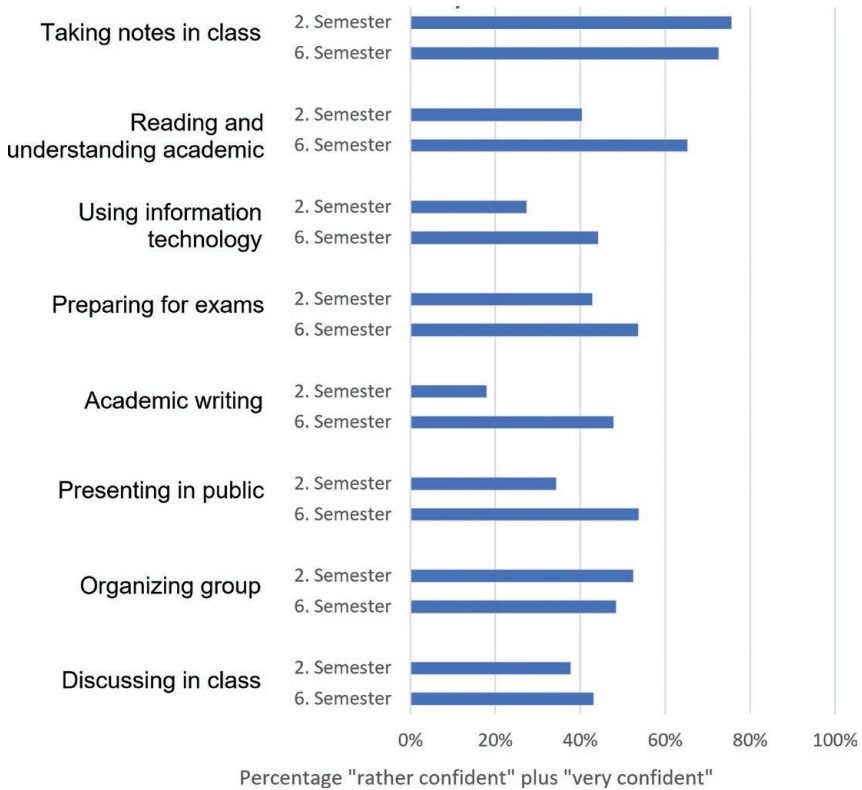


Figure 3.12. Differences in self-reported study skills between first and third year.

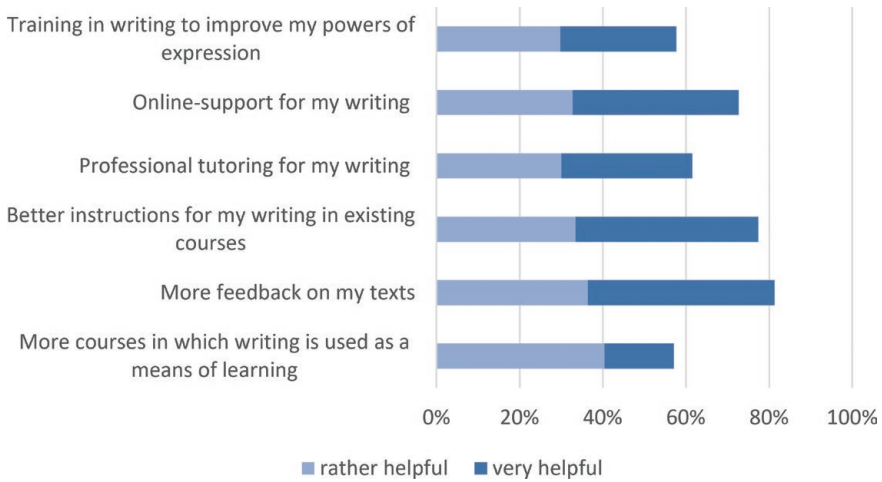


Figure 3.13. Students' responses on: "How could instructions for writing during your studies be improved?"

Discussion

The data from this study seems to provide a suitable basis for a description of the writing cultures of this particular university. The values faculty and students place on academic writing and academic texts within these particular undergraduate degree programs show fairly consistent patterns. The data also pictures fairly clearly what students and faculty believe about writing skills. Naturally, confidence in skills (students) and assumed skills (faculty) should not be mistaken for actual writing performance which demand a completely different kind of assessment. To understand cultures, however, beliefs may be even more revealing than performance measures as they refer to stable identities and motivations of the actors.

What seems the most noteworthy result for a characterization of the writing culture studied, was the existence of the "big five" values: *Relying on sources, relying on facts, objectivity, terminological accuracy, a clear thematic structure*. They were assessed by all groups unanimously with a degree of acceptance at around 90% as important beyond average. They connect all three discipline groups as well as students and faculty. We may link them to some larger objectives of all sciences and humanities: discursiveness of writing (sources), research-based writing (facts), exclusion of personal interests and emotions (objectivity), precise language use (terminological accuracy), and conceptual connectedness (clear thematic structure). Taken together, these values tie academic writing, at this university, to a research-based

quality of teaching at the expense of other, more creative or narrative ways of writing.

Two factors which often are thought of as universal values, turned out to differentiate between the sciences and the humanities. One of them is *critical thinking* which is the top value in the humanities but of lesser importance for the sciences and the pol+econ disciplines. The reasons for this lower appraisal are not quite clear. It may be caused by conceptual differences in understanding critical thinking or by different epistemic assumptions about the nature of knowledge. The other item marking a difference is *convincing arguments*. Although we do not believe that argumentation is of lesser importance for the sciences, it still stands back against the “big five” factors. We feel, however, entitled to speak of a 5+2 structure that includes the high-ranking values but also reflects disciplinary differences.

Different conceptualizations of writing may be assumed from the divergent evaluations of *expressing an own point of view* (Figure 3.7). Here, the humanities seem to have a different understanding of how writers are included in their text, and it may reflect the high value the humanities place on critical thinking as a way of student engagement in disciplinary topics (Bean, 2011).

The relatively high value of the humanities of *elegant language* and the equally high value in the sciences of *simple and comprehensive language* point at a difference between the two linguistic cultures and remind us of the dispute on language use that has been addressed by Thomas Sprat already at the very beginning of science publication in the 17th century, where rhetorical refinement stood against plain language.

We found that students in general are in line with the values of their faculty. They do not misunderstand the main tasks or obligations of academic writing in any gross way. Still, there are some instructive differences between students and faculty evaluations which may be indicative of potential misunderstandings in the teaching of writing and the evaluation of student papers. These differences are connected with an understanding of the language dimension of academic writing where the consensus between faculty and students is rather low.

Does the questionnaire offer a foundation for characterizing local writing cultures? It may not come as a surprise that a research university fosters research-based writing. It is a surprise, however, how unanimously these values are expressed and how solidly they appear in the data as a baseline for writing instruction and teaching. This does not contradict the result, that there are enough open questions emerging from the data concerning the epistemological assumptions of the disciplines and the conceptualizations of writing as a means of learning and communication. At this point, comparative data from

other universities and from other contexts would be helpful. Even if the main values are shared throughout the university, there are some clear differences between the disciplinary groups and allow for interpretations of what is specific for each of them. The questionnaire allows conclusions for the teaching of writing and provides clues as to where students match and miss what their teachers have in mind. This, particularly, has been of worth for the writing centre of the university.

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Glossary

Beliefs about “good writing”: Assumptions students and faculty hold about the desired or required qualities of writing and text characteristics. Such beliefs are an important part of writing cultures. Beliefs, however, tend to change with growing experience in academic writing as well as with learning opportunities by any kind of writing instruction.

Cultural diversity: A line of thinking based on cultural diversity assumes that groups and societies are not homogeneous or monolithic in their attitudes, behaviours, ethnic descendances, gender orientation, beliefs, etc., but that differences are constitutive for cultures. Writing cultures, seen through the lens of diversity, may be characterized not only by the shared properties of all members but also by the multitude of individual preferences, styles, activities, strategies, and values. In individualized societies, diversity is an essential part of social organizations from which important rules for social life evolve.

Epistemic beliefs: Based on a study by William Perry (1970) on the intellectual and moral development of university students, epistemic beliefs are defined as the assumptions students hold about the nature of truth and knowledge. In a four-stage developmental model subdivided into nine separate positions, Perry tried to capture the transformations students undergo from initial assumptions of absolute truth through stages of relativism to an individualized and research-based view on knowledge generation.

European writing cultures: Writing as a way of teaching and learning in higher education developed fairly independent from each other in each of the roughly fifty European countries most of which were using their own languages. Although some countries like the UK, Germany, France, and the Soviet Union were influential beyond their borders, there were almost no coordinative and not even discursive connections between the countries. What connected the countries were the international publication norms which increasingly are taken as the basis to model student writing. Sources: Chitez & Kruse (2012); Chitez et al. (2015); Foster & Russell (2002); Kruse (2013).

Small-culture approach: In contrast to its common usage as a way of characterizing nations, ethnicities, or language groups, Holliday (1999) suggested to apply the term “culture” to the study of small groups such as institutions, disciplines, research communities, or working groups. The study of small groups provides a more solid empirical basis for generalizations which can avoid stereotypes and essentializations. To Holliday, small cultures studies may apply to all kinds of groups that are connected by any kind of cohesive behaviour.

Writing cultures: They may be defined as integrated and relatively stable patterns of writing practices, genres and attitudes towards writing that have emerged in a particular geographical, institutional or functional context. They are not fixed forever but may change whenever they get in contact to other writing cultures, be it within an institution, in national or in international contexts of higher education permitting or enforcing adaptation to new procedures, practices or conventions.

Writing practices: A main aspect of writing cultures may be summarized under the term “writing practices” referring to the activities into which writing is involved. Practices cover such issues as assignment procedures, written examinations, graduation routines, feedback practices, personal or reflective writing, and the individual organization of writing processes.

Writing skills: Academic writing is not a unitary skill but has to be seen as a complex competence composed of many different sub-skills, each of them rooted in a different part of literacy or academic practice. These may cover (Kruse, 2013): Disciplinary knowledge construction and their respective epistemologies; writing processes, and procedural skills such as planning, structuring, and revision; discourse patterns such as understanding audience and author roles; media use, such as making use of word processors, or search engines; genre knowledge and genre awareness; linguistic skills such as spelling, grammar, and rhetorical means like hedging, meta discourse, intertextuality, and self-reference. Writing skills and the ways they are taught (or not) are essential parts of writing cultures.

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