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Writing education around the globe: introduction and call for a new global analysis

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Abstract This paper presents a special issue on writing around the globe. Researchers from across the world describe writing practices in their country using a wide variety of methodology. The paper show that while there are many similarities in writing instruction from one country to the next, there are also many differences. As a result, the authors call for a new international study of writing, one that takes more descriptive rather than a comparative approach.

Keywords Writing · Composition · Classroom practices

Introduction

In 2014, we had multiple opportunities to meet and talk about writing research and the state of writing instruction worldwide. Our conversations took place in a beautiful setting. We were in Amsterdam in August, and we were surrounded by writing researchers from across the globe. We were at the Writing Research Conference convened by the SIG WRITING of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction.

Over the course of the conference both of us talked with other scholars from across the globe about writing and writing education in their countries. This was so much fun that we decided that we would edit a special issue on writing education

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worldwide—Enter Malt Joshi and *Reading & Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. We wanted to publish this special issue in a highly visible and impactful journal which is read by scholars from all corners of the globe. The choice was easy. We put together a proposal and sent it to Malt. Fortunately, he said yes.

Our basic plan for the special issue was to advertise it as broadly as possible, inviting scholars to submit papers about writing education in their country. We were agnostic about methods of research, encouraging submissions of quantitative and qualitative studies, observational and survey research, as well as case studies cutting across multiple schools. The idea was to gain a better sense of the various ways that writing education takes place internationally. All paper submitted to the special issue were subject to a blind peer-review process.

We were extremely pleased with the response to the call for papers, as we received studies conducted on every continent except Antarctica (we counted a submitted paper from New Zealand as covering the continent of Australia). Before proceeding further, we want to thank all of those who submitted a paper for the special issue (only about one-half of the papers were selected for publication), the reviewers who evaluated these papers, and Malt Joshi for giving us the green light to go forward.

Eleven articles were accepted for publication in this special issue of *Reading and Writing*. A technical error resulted in two papers being published in an another issue of the journal. This included a paper by Dockrell, Marshall, and Wyse examining writing practices in primary schools in England (doi: 10.1007/s11145-015-9605-9) as well as a paper by Hertzberg and Roe examining writing in the content subjects in a network of Norwegian secondary schools (doi: 10.1007/s11145-015-9607-7). We included them in our presentation and discussion of the special issue here.

Context leading up to the special issue

The Research on Writing Conference in Amsterdam was the perfect place for stimulating our thinking about how to go about collecting insights from various countries about the practice of writing education. Researchers from countries around the world attended the Conference, representing a large variation of cultural backgrounds as well as diversity in research foci and methodology. This provided a rich environment for thinking about how to put together a collection of a comparative set of studies on writing education.

In many published research papers, the cultural component of writing education is quite often neutralized. At a conference, such as SIG WRITING, participants frequently ask questions about background features, which often reveals quite different perspectives on the what, why and how writing is taught in particular countries. As we attended sessions and talked about what we learned, this became increasingly obvious. For example, in many English speaking countries, students often write a first draft and receive feedback from their teacher, but in Vietnam we learned that this is uncommon. Students do not typically create unfinished drafts, as they are expected to honor a teacher’s time following a Confucian perspective. Likewise, brainstorming which is a popular strategy for generating ideas in English

speaking countries can be viewed as unsuitable in other cultures when writing a text is a way to demonstrate moral knowledge, which may be generally fixed in specific cultures.

We also observed that even in regions that are more closely related, differences in writing can be as prominent as similarities. Writing an argumentative text in France may not be identical to writing an argument in Germany or England. The conception of a good argument from one country to the next can differ on many dimensions including how the essay is structured and how the argument is supported. For teachers in higher education today, this comes as no surprise, as the international makeup of college classrooms means that students bring considerable variation in their views about what writing is, what texts are, and what texts should do.

During the twentieth century, a large international study, under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) set up and executed a comparative study examining the writing performance and education of students in 16 countries. The project produced considerable data on inputs into writing education in the participating countries, but it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the relationships between what happened in writing education and how students' performed on writing measures. Alan Purves, who chaired the whole project, wrote, 10 years after the start of it, a reflection emphasizing three themes: (1) school writing is an ill-defined domain, (2) school writing is a matter of products not processes, and (3) the quality of school writing is what observers report they see (Purves, 1992).

The assessment of students' writing performances in the IEA study proved to be particularly difficult, and there was no adequate solution to the problem. It proved to be impossible to rate the texts from the various writing tasks form the various cultures on the same scale. The writing researchers in the IEA study not only faced the well-known problem that a student's writing in one genre is not highly predictive of their writing in another genre (Graham, Harris, & Heber, 2011), but also that correlations for writing scores varied between the participating countries. In essence, other forces than genre variation were at hand such as instruction and scoring differences between raters in different countries (Purves, 1992). Purves concluded that the construct 'writing' may be misleading, at least in an international context.

Purves (1992) also reported that conceptions of writing education varied across the 16 countries studied. He found for instance that for similar writing tasks, Italy and Finland devoted at least four times as much time as classrooms in the United States. For the Italian and Finnish students this time involved producing two to three versions of a text before producing a final one to give to the teacher. Students in the United States often produced a single version of the text in the relatively short time allotted for them to write (usually no more than 45 min). These variations in classroom practices created numerous problems in assessing writing performance internationally. For the IEA study, students were provided with 20 or 60 min, depending on the task. This was adequate for students from the United States, who typically spent 45 min or less on a writing task, but can be viewed as inadequate for Italian and Finnish students. Practically, time allocated to testing was about the

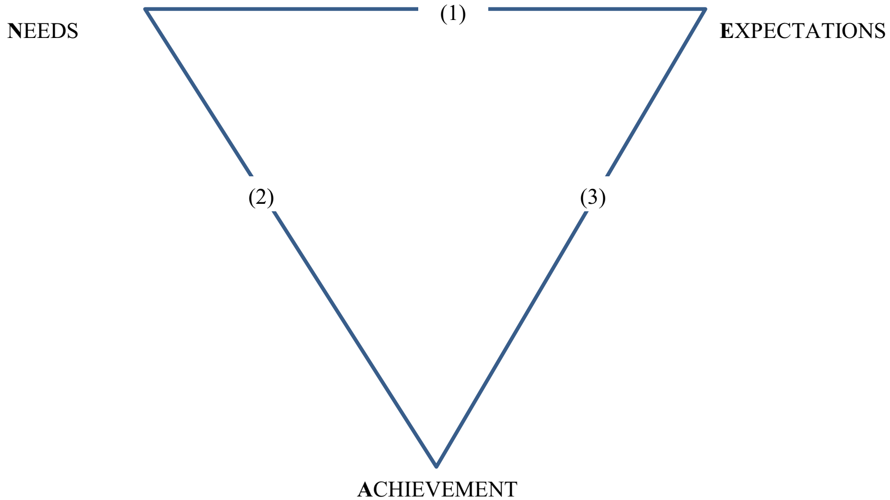
same amount of time that Italian and Finnish students typically spent on creating a not so neat first draft (i.e., a text-under-construction).

Purves (1992) further argued that the concept of writing varied across countries, which affects students, teachers and raters. Even when tasks were relatively well-defined, cultural differences still played an important role. For example, he noted that students from Indonesian generally viewed writing tasks as an invitation to write a personal narrative. Rather than write an argument, they would write a story about an argument. What then can we say about the Indonesian raters, rating argumentative texts form 16 different countries, or Dutch raters, rating argumentative texts form 16 countries, with Indonesian narratives included? What do we expect form such an international comparisons when seemingly the same task is so differently interpreted by students and raters from different cultures? In fact, the most stable writing scores across countries were for handwriting quality.

The upshot of this IEA-written composition study is relativism. We may want to compare writing education and outcomes in various countries, but this is not straightforward or easy. We can analyze differences in writing practices across countries as well as differences in how students from different educational systems tackle writing tasks. We can also assess whether different countries value the writing practices employed in their schools and whether they are pleased with the writing outcomes associated with these practices. Nevertheless, comparisons that are meant to evaluate if one country has better writing outcomes or better writing education than another do not appear to be fruitful given Purves's (1992) observations.

The discrepancies between three factors—societal needs, societal expectancies, and educational outcomes—are relevant when considering writing education in a specific country (Rijlaarsdam, 1992; Rijlaarsdam & Janssen, 1996). In other words, to what extent is there a discrepancy between need and expectations (societal concern), between expectations and outcomes (societal perceptiveness/whingeing), and between needs and outcomes (societal need fulfillment)?

The relationships between these three factors are depicted in Fig. 1. They provide our current ideal for examining writing practices. This includes: (1) an analytic description of practice—what and how writing is taught, how it is used in various school subjects, and what kind of texts students write (features represented in texts); (2) an understanding of the degree to which relevant parties in the particular society are satisfied with the texts students write, and (3) an analysis of the degree to which these parties expected outcomes were realized. In the Netherlands for instance, there was considerable societal concern about correct spelling, until it became clear that fewer spelling errors occurred than concerned parties expected (Rijlaarsdam & Blok, 1988; Rijlaarsdam, 1992). To illustrate, the average Dutchman *expected* to find in an average teacher trainee's letter to parents one error in a fifth of the sentences, whereas they would allow not more than one error in 20 sentences. This is a very large discrepancy. It turned out, however, that the observed gap was far less than expected: one error in ten sentences. Much of the concern was in part due to a much too negative expectation on the part of typical Dutchmen: this concern can be ascribed to whingeing or persistent and irritating complaining about a particular state of affairs that is misperceived (Rijlaarsdam, 1992: 268).



(1): N-E discrepancy: Concern Indicator

(2): N-A discrepancy: Need fulfillment Indicator

(3): E-A discrepancy: Perceptiveness/Whingeing Indicator

Fig. 1 Triangular model for contextual evaluation of educational outcomes (based on Rijlaarsdam 1992, p. 265)

We next describe the papers that were included in the special issue. We then turn to describing what we believe is a needed international comparison of writing education worldwide.

The special issue

The papers included in this special issue of *Reading and Writing* represent the variation in topics that are likely when a call for papers is put forth. They deal with a wide variety of topics in writing education, but generally deal with one or more of the factors for addressing a contextual evaluation of writing outcomes as depicted in Fig. 1 and described above. All of the assembled papers report on one or more relevant issues in writing education within the national context in which they were conducted. They vary however in focus, ranging from investigations on what and how writing is taught, what and how a national curriculum is enacted, to how in-service preparation affects practice. Papers also varied in research approaches, from rigorous classroom observational studies to surveys of writing practices, from case studies to representative sampling, from quantitative and qualitative to mixtures. The studies do show how varied writing education is worldwide, but they also illustrate that there are similarities as well.

The first paper in the special issue is by Coker, Farley-Ripple, Jackson, Wen, MacArthur, and Jennings. Within the context of a new educational reform initiative in the United States (Common Core State Standards), they observed first grade writing instruction across 13 schools in a Mid-Atlantic state. They found that writing instruction was inconsistent across classrooms, with writing typically taught for less than 30 min a day. Teachers commonly taught writing skills and processes though.

In a study with older children, De Smedt, Van Keer, and Merchie surveyed Flemish teachers about how they taught writing to fifth and sixth grade students and what they thought about writing and their writing instruction. Teachers spent only about 65 min a week (i.e., 13 min a day) on writing, and instruction in writing mainly focused on teaching writing skills. Teacher and student motivation predicted how well students' wrote.

In another survey study, Hsiang and Graham surveyed grade 4–6 teachers in Bejing, Macao, and Taipei City about their writing instruction practices (these cities share a common cultural background, but differ politically). Teachers generally taught writing only once every 2–4 weeks, with an average lesson lasting over an hour in length (process, product, and content were emphasized). While teachers in the three locations differed on almost every aspect of writing they were asked about, differences were mostly a matter of degree (i.e., how much) versus a more general difference in how writing was taught.

Wilcox, Jeffrey, and Gardner-Bixler conducted a mixed method study examining how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS is a reform effort described in the Cooker et al. study too) was influencing writing instruction in elementary schools in the United States. They used quantitative methods to identify schools performing higher than expected on prior State assessments and schools performing at expected levels. These schools were studied qualitatively through interviews, focus groups, and observations to determine how writing was taught and teachers' reaction to this new reform movement. Teachers in the "odds-beating" schools typically applied evidence-based writing practices. While both sets of teachers were generally positive about CCSS, teachers in more typically performing schools were more negative about the lack of emphasis on creative writing in this reform movement.

Another study conducted in the United States and focusing on elementary schools surveyed teachers nationally about their writing practices. Brindle, Graham, Harris, and Hebert reported that approximately 40 min a day was spent on writing instruction (25 min writing and 15 min teaching). Teachers reported that they were better prepared to teach reading, math, social studies, and science than they were to teach writing. Teachers' preparation, efficacy for teaching writing, and beliefs about writing instruction all predicted some aspects of their reported teaching practices.

A study by Siamo, Malpique, Lourdes, and Marques compared writing instruction in Portugal and Brazil—two Portuguese speaking countries. Middle school teachers in both countries were surveyed about their writing practices. While Brazilian and Portuguese teachers spent little time teaching writing and rarely taught strategies for writing, both groups of teachers viewed writing as a shared responsibility, but Brazilian teachers more strongly embraced the idea that teaching writing was the responsibility of all teachers. In contrast, Portuguese teachers

viewed writing as more important for students' academic and professional success than Brazilian teachers.

Parr examined writing instruction in primary schools in New Zealand, where there is considerable potential for variability in writing education, as the national curriculum is broad, self-governing schools interpret and apply this curriculum to their local context, and external examinations do not occur until the last 3 years of schooling. While the study drew on an examination of policy documents and other resources specific to New Zealand, teachers were also surveyed about their writing practices. In contrast to the other studies reviewed above, writing education in these teachers' classrooms reflected a teaching as inquiry approach to learning.

Tse and Hui also focused on policy issues examining how schools in Hong Kong responded to changes in the official writing curriculum. Various sources of data, such as interviews and focus groups, were examined to describe primary and secondary teachers' transition to a writing curriculum that now emphasizes writing to learn and using writing as a mechanism for describing and relating personal ideas and impressions to the students' own goals and learning. The researchers found that Hong Kong teachers welcomed the new reforms and were knowledgeable about them, embracing a more student-centered learning approach to writing education.

Ray, Graham, Houston, and Harris surveyed middle school teachers from across the United States to determine if writing was used to support students' learning. Teachers reported applying 15 of more writing to learn strategies at least once a month or more often. Their use of such strategies was related to their preparation to teach writing and how many English language learners and students with special needs were in their classroom.

Primary grade teachers in England were surveyed by Dockrell, Marshall, and Wyse about how they taught writing. Teachers indicated they were well prepared to teach writing, and indicated they taught all aspects of writing, but concentrated more on word level work involving spelling and writing conventions.

The final study in this special issue was conducted in Norway by Hetzberg and Roe. They collected quantitative and qualitative data from a network of secondary schools that had established a cross-curricular writing project. Teachers in these schools meet regularly to talk about how to teach writing and shared their experiences through students' writing. The primary outcome of these meetings was the development of a broader array of instructional strategies and more goal-related use of scaffolding instruction, both of which are consistent with a process approach to writing.

As this description of the 11 articles in this special issue make clear, there is considerable variability in how writing is taught within and across countries. Some studies described how writing is taught, how it is used across subject areas, and what students write. While less common, other studies addressed the importance of writing, satisfaction with efforts to teach writing, and the mismatches that occurred between expectations for writing education and realized practices.

Looking ahead

We conclude by considering some things we would do if we were to set up an international comparative study on writing education. We described earlier our ideal for examining writing practices, and return to this here in a more detailed way.

First, our proposed study would be different from the 1980's IEA study on Written Composition. The aims and scope would be broader, including aims, processes, and outcomes as well as societal needs, expectations, and assessment—in a historical context. The importance of doing this within a historical context was illustrated in the study on writing education in Norway in this issue: strategy oriented writing education was embedded in the then current curriculum orientation; communicative writing. That is, one approach was not replaced by another, but interwoven. This is how curriculum innovation and changing practice take place; relative slowly and, if successful, along lines of integration.

To provide a basis for comparison between educational systems or cultures, we would opt for a descriptive framework. As teachers are the key-actors in the teaching of writing, we would focus on what teachers do and think in the practice of writing education, and what students write and can write as well as what they know.

What teachers do

A suitable framework for studying teachers in action is the dynamic model of educational effectiveness proposed and tested by Kyriakides, Creemers and Antoniou (2009). They constructed observation instruments and student reports on factors of effective teaching, like orientation, structuring, questioning, teaching modeling, application, management of time, teacher role in making a classroom a learning environment, and classroom assessment (Kyriakides et al., 2009; p. 14). Each of these factors was assessed on five dimensions: frequency, focus (single or multiple focus, specific or general), stage (repetition of action, constancy), quality (for instance; stating the objectives or engaging students in identifying the purposes) and differentiation (how content and tasks are adapted to groups).

In their study, Kyriakides et al. (2009) explained more than 50 % of the variation in student outcomes for language education based on these eight factors assessed on these five dimensions. Moreover, these items seemed to be clustered in five categories, showing an increasing level of difficulty (see Table 1).

What teachers think

Another set of variables we think would be important in a comparative study of writing education worldwide involves teacher beliefs about writing and writing instruction as well as their views about their own competence as writing teachers. We also think it would be important to obtain a measure of their knowledge about writing and how to teach it. Professional skill development in and from practice is

Table 1 Teacher activities along two dimensions in five clusters of difficulty (1–5, 1 being least difficult) based on Kyriakides et al., 2009)

Teacher activities	Appearance in classes				
	Frequency	Stage	Quality	Focus	Differentiation
Management learning time	1	1			4
Structuring	1	2	3		4
Application	1	2	2	2	4
Assessment	1	3	3		4
Questioning	1	2	2	3	4
Teacher-student relations	1	3	5	3	5
Student relations	2	3	5	3	5
Teaching modeling	3	4	5	5	
Orientation	3	4	5	5	5
Feedback			3		

guided by understanding of what is and should happen in practice. One can only learn something in and from practice when the phenomenon is perceived. Here knowledge and beliefs 'filters' the mind (Kyriakides et al., 2009). Investigating teachers' beliefs and knowledge about writing, writing education, and education more generally should reveal interesting cultural and regional variation, as these beliefs and knowledge are embedded in the personal development, and therefore in the history and culture of that region.

One way of accessing teacher beliefs is through self-report measures. This was done with questionnaires in different regions in papers published in this issue, and similar types of questions were asked at least in some of the studies. It is likely that a single self-report questionnaire will cover local realities across countries differently, and that the internal structure of such instruments may manifest differently in different regions and in different sections of schooling. One example of a questionnaire that could be used to assess teachers' beliefs is White and Bruning's (2005) Writing Beliefs measure. This instrument has two scales: Writing as Transmission and Writing as Transaction. Another example is the Writing Orientation Scale developed by Graham, Harris, MacArthur, and Fink (2002). This scale assesses three different beliefs about teaching writing, which are operationalized as: Correct Writing, Explicit Instruction and Natural Learning. We might expect that if such scales were used that not all concepts measured will be relevant in all regions, some regional concepts will not be assessed by these scales as conceptualized, and some concepts will be operationalized differently. Constructing and validating a worldwide applicable instrument will be a study in itself. Of course, it may be useful to develop multiple instruments that are responsive to the culture and realities of specific countries or to use other methods to assess these types of concepts.

For measuring an area such as perceived competence to teach writing, a self-report instrument like the Teacher Efficacy Scale for Writing is available (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Graham, Harris, Fink, and MacArthur, 2001; Troia, & Maddox, 2004). This questionnaire represents two concepts: Personal teaching efficacy—teachers' beliefs

about their own ability to teach writing and to affect positive changes in their students and general teaching efficacy, beliefs about limitations on the effectiveness of their teaching, created by environmental factors, such as students' home environment. Here again, we may expect that the concepts may hold in different regions, but that operationalizations will or must vary. Also, a worldwide comparative study would benefit from studying different ways of assessing this and other teachers' beliefs as well as knowledge about writing and how to teach it.

What students do

While the focal point of international comparative studies place considerable attention on students' ability to perform specific tasks (such as writing an argument), we think it is also important to assess what students' do when performing such tasks. An example of an instrument that examines what students do is Lavelle's inventory of Processes in College Composition (Lavelle, 2007). This instrument focuses on Elaborative, Low Self-Efficacy, Reflective-Revision, Spontaneous-Impulsive, and Procedural constructs, representing interrelations between students' beliefs and their strategies in academic writing. A different example involves Kieft and colleagues published studies with their Writing Process Inventory, focusing on what students do, resulting in scores on two dimensions: a preplanning ('engineer') style, and a first exploratory draft and strong revising ('sculptor') style (Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, Galbraith, & Van den Bergh, 2007; Tillema, Van den Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, & Sanders, 2011).

Furthermore, there are new approaches for gauging what students do as they write. In some instance, these methods provide the opportunity to get unobtrusively insight into students' writing process using digital tools such as screen capturing, keylogging programs, eye-movements and eye-and-pen technology (see http://www.writingpro.eu/logging_programs.php for an overview of such procedures).

What students think

It is equally important in our view to determine what students believe and know about writing. Students' insights in how to write a certain text and/or what a good text entails can be elicited by a writing task to inform another student about what a good text entails (Schoonen & De Glopper, 1996). Such question could also be asked about writing education: 'What are best writing lessons? Write an advisory letter to the head of school.' Such knowledge can further be gathered by interviewing students about the purpose of writing; what good writers do when they compose; why some students have difficulty with writing; and what advise they would give a friend when planning and revising, constructing a specific type of paper, or when writing a paper for a younger student (Gillespie, Olinghouse, & Graham, 2013; Saddler & Graham, 2007).

In addition, there are various inventories for assessing students' beliefs about writing, such as the Writing Apprehension Scale (WAS Kuhlemeier, Van den

Bergh, & Rijlaarsdam, 2002; Rijlaarsdam, & Van den Bergh, 1987), which examines cognitive, affective and the public-evaluation dimensions of apprehension towards writing. Similarly, students' estimate on how proficient they are as writers can be assessed with self-efficacy scales (Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007).

Conclusion

In contemplating an international comparative study on writing education, it is critical to take into account regional differences in the underlying writing education and how these are operationalized. We should also consider differences in research traditions and values. This special issue illustrates this maxim. When you issue a call for participation in a special issue on writing education, different regions respond with different methodologies to provide insight into national developments. Our experiences as editors of this special issue and of other research journals, has taught us that how writing is studied in various regions depends not only on the concepts that are most dominant, but also on the methodologies that are most preferred: sociological approaches, quantitative, qualitative, focus on text linguistics etc. This does not mean that all studies from a region are identical in approach and purpose, but that general trends are clearly evident.

One thing that we learned from doing this special issue is that it is not necessary to conduct a single worldwide study to gain insight into national writing education tendencies, like the IEA-study tried to do. This is not to say that such an effort would not be welcome, but we can set up an international comparison in a different way. That is, we can propose a common frame of reference that is used by investigators in different countries or regions to conduct multiple interrelated studies that focus on: assessment of needs, expectations and outcome and the discrepancies between these three societal parameters, and, in the light of such as an assessment (or a single worldwide study), we need to assess:

1. What teachers do and think
2. What students do and think
3. Qualities of students' texts: providing text scales (distribution of qualities) of writing achievement as well as expected and needed scores on these distributions (needed level of achievement, expected level of achievement, related to the specific level of schooling).

We invite you to help make this a reality and to continue the dialogue on how to think about studying writing education around the globe!

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