This study investigated how Canadian university student interns in three disciplines perceived their educational preparation for workplace writing. The students’ perceptions differed markedly according to disciplinary background, with Management students responding very positively about their preparation, Political Science students responding positively, and Communications Studies students responding negatively. The authors discuss how these responses potentially reflect differing student expectations; theory-practice linkages; and patterns of integrating instruction and practice in research, analysis, and workplace genres across these disciplines. The results suggest that universities can prepare students for workplace writing by providing them with instruction and practice in common workplace genres, relevant research and analytic skills, experience in collaborative writing, ample feedback on their writing, and an appreciation for the socially situated nature of genres and genre acquisition. The authors also point to the benefits of work placement and internship programs and suggest directions for further research.

**Keywords:** genre acquisition; workplace writing; writing in the disciplines; business writing; internship

How well do students think university prepares them for the writing they will do in their future work lives? In the exploratory case study that we report on in this article, we set out to investigate this question by interviewing nine students at one Canadian university. The students were from three disciplines—Management, Political Science, and Communications Studies—and all were participants in cooperative education programs in which they completed work-term placements that involved writing in the workplace. We were interested in investigating the transfer of writing skills from university to the workplace, in particular the extent to which...
workplace genres can be taught outside the workplace. As part of our research into students’ experiences as novices writing in the workplace, we probed students’ perceptions of their university preparation for workplace writing. Although university instructors might wish it were otherwise, in these days of “student as customer” and in the context of an ever-increasing focus on accountability, what students think about various aspects of their university education has become a factor in designing university programs and in maintaining their reputation.

Among the students we interviewed, we found striking differences in the perceived degree of preparedness for workplace writing according to the students’ disciplinary backgrounds: The Management students responded highly positively about their preparation, the Political Science students responded positively, and the Communications Studies students responded negatively. We believe that these differences relate to the differing relationships between theory and practice in these disciplines and to the ways in which instruction and practice in research, analytical skills, and workplace genres are integrated into students’ disciplinary studies. We also speculate that students from Management, Political Science, and Communications Studies have quite different expectations of their degrees and of themselves as writers in the workplace and that these differing expectations influence how they perceive their preparation for workplace writing.

Although it is clear that the transfer of writing skills from the classroom to the workplace is a complex phenomenon and that there are no easy answers to the question of how best to prepare students for workplace writing, our research leads us to the position that despite the differences between classroom and workplace writing, universities play an important role in preparing students for workplace writing. We believe that the classroom can provide students with a grasp of the basic conventions of common workplace genres, a grounding in the research and analytic skills integral to particular genres, practice in producing those genres, and an appreciation for the complex nature of genres and genre acquisition. The classroom can also enhance students’ development as writers by providing them with experience in collaborative writing and with helpful feedback on their writing—including attention to matters of style and correctness.

**RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

As part of their study of workplace writing, Faigley and Miller (1982) asked 200 workers from a range of occupations what they thought should be taught in university writing courses. Among the most frequent responses were clarity, grammar, mechanics, organization, brevity, and “specific business and technical formats” (p. 561). Since their study, developments in genre theory and the growing literature on the transitions of novice writers from academic to workplace settings have thrown into question the extent to which nonacademic genres can be learned outside the workplace (e.g., Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Dannels, 2000; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Lutz, 1989). A number of stud-
ies have identified differences between academic and workplace writing contexts and have examined the way in which the different social roles performed by writing in the two contexts affect both the process and the product of writing activities (e.g., Dias et al., 1999; Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994). Other studies have focused on the transition experiences of novice writers and the processes by which they become enculturated into the writing norms and practices of workplace communities (e.g., Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Lutz, 1989; MacKinnon, 1993; Paré, 2000; Winsor, 1996, 2001). Although such studies reflect on the ways in which university

prepares—or fails to prepare—students for writing in the workplace, few studies have directly investigated writers’ perceptions of their university preparation for workplace writing. One exception is Vest, Long, Thomas, and Palmquist’s (1995) study of new engineering hires. Their respondents’ assessment of the usefulness of their university communication training ranged from “doesn’t prepare you for the reality of working” to “adequate” (p. 14). Vest et al. found that “engineers who were the most satisfied with their college preparation recalled that oral and written communication were integral and significant components in many of their engineering courses” (p. 14).

Research into transitions to the workplace has made it clear that developing competence in workplace writing requires much more than learning the formal features of the particular workplace genres (see, e.g., Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Dannels, 2000; Dias et al., 1999; Freedman, 1993, 1994). Genre theory can help us to understand why this is so. The word genre has traditionally been used to denote particular kinds of written discourse embodying conventional sets of formal features; however, a far more productive view of genre lies in the reconceptualization of textual genres as forms of “social action” (Miller, 1984/1994). In this view, genre is seen as “a complex pattern of repeated social activity and rhetorical performance arising in response to a recurrent situation” (Paré & Smart, 1994, p. 146). This perspective on genre invites a focus on writing as an activity inseparable from the con-

We believe that the classroom can provide students with a grasp of the basic conventions of common workplace genres, a grounding in the research and analytic skills integral to particular genres, practice in producing particular genres, and an appreciation for the complex nature of genres and genre acquisition.
texts in which it takes place, carried out by members of particular organizations or discourse communities (Bazerman, 1999; Swales, 1990).

If genres are understood to be inseparable from the social contexts in which they function, we may well ask whether workplace genres can be adequately taught in an academic context. The debate about the teaching of genres centers on the sharp differences between academic and workplace writing. Writing performs very different functions in each context; we might even regard school and work to be, as Dias et al. put it in the title of their 1999 book, “worlds apart.” Based on the insights of genre theory, a growing literature addresses the difficulties of teaching workplace genres within academic courses, whether these are writing courses or courses in professional disciplines such as engineering, law, nursing, and social work (e.g., Dannels, 2000; Dias et al., 1999; Freedman, 1994; Freedman et al., 1994). Dias and his colleagues (1999) concluded that “school-based simulations of workplace writing fail to prepare students for professional writing because they cannot adequately replicate the local rhetorical complexity of workplace contexts” (p. 201).

But how do these insights from genre theory and research into workplace writing square with students’ own perceptions of their university preparation for workplace writing? And how do students’ perceptions vary according to their disciplinary background? Although studies have reflected on the educational preparation of student interns from English and Journalism (Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Lutz, 1989) and from professional fields such as Engineering (e.g., Vest et al., 1995; Winsor, 1996), we could find no studies that compared perceptions of their preparation for workplace writing among students in different disciplines. Even though students’ perceptions are only one way to study how well students are prepared for workplace writing, they nevertheless can provide valuable insights, particularly when students’ perceptions are informed by experiences in the workplace as well as by their academic experiences.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

To investigate how well students think their university education prepared them for the writing they did in their work-term placements, we conducted an exploratory qualitative case study. As is typical in qualitative research, our sample was relatively small. We interviewed university students—three from Management, three from Political Science, and three from Communications Studies—who were currently in or had just completed work-term placements that required them to write on the job. The students were chosen randomly from a list of participants in a university cooperative education program in which students alternate their academic studies with up to six paid work-term placements of 4 months each. All but one student were in their 4th year of studies, all but two were in their early 20s, all had English as their first language, and five of the nine were female. One student, Lee, had a previous degree in architecture. These students’ most recent work-term placements included a charitable organization, a resource company, transportation
and tourism organizations, and various federal and provincial government departments. In this article, we refer to all student participants by pseudonyms.

As we reviewed our data, it became immediately apparent that students’ perceptions of their educational preparation for workplace writing differed markedly according to their disciplinary background. Accordingly, we have organized our findings by students’ discipline. In discussing our findings, we delve into possible reasons for the disciplinary differences we found.

**STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR UNIVERSITY PREPARATION FOR WORKPLACE WRITING**

Our results revealed distinct differences in how students characterized their university preparation for workplace writing. Their responses ranged from highly positive for the Management students, to positive for the Political Science students, to negative for the Communications Studies students. Several factors emerged as key issues in how students perceived their educational preparation for workplace writing: their grounding in analytic and research skills; the instruction and practice they
had received in specific genres; their experience in collaborative writing; and the feedback they had received on their writing, including the attention paid to editorial matters.

Perceptions of Management Students

The Management students we interviewed were all in their 4th year of university. One of these students, Rick, was on his second work term in a travel service company. His previous work term had also been in the tourism business. He estimated that he spent about 35% of his work day writing a recommendation report and designing new forms for use with customers. Twyla was also on her second work term. She, too, worked for a large travel company, and her previous work term had been with the federal government. She estimated that she spent 60% to 70% of her workday writing news releases, letters, and a market analysis report. Lee, also on his second work term, worked for a small museum, where he spent about 25% of his time writing educational materials for children.

Noting that the Canadian university at which this study was conducted does not offer a freshman composition course, we asked each participant to describe his or her university instruction in writing. All three Management students said that they had taken an English literature course in their 1st year and a course in business writing in either their 1st or 2nd year. The students noted that although the English literature course provided some instruction in essay writing, its primary focus was on literary analysis. The business writing course, they said, introduced them to various business genres, including proposals, memos, and reports.

Perhaps surprisingly, Management students’ satisfaction with their university preparation for workplace writing appeared to be grounded not in the business writing course they had taken but in the analytic skills they had acquired in their content-area Management courses. When we asked Rick how well his university education had prepared him for writing in the workplace, he elaborated on his immediately positive response by referring to the kinds of analytic skills he had acquired in his Management studies, commenting, “What I’ve acquired from school has been . . . [the ability to] analyze problems, approach things right, report them properly, look at both sides, step back, walk around issues.” When describing a recommendation report he had produced in his work term for a transportation company, he said, “It was all just applying basic concepts I’d learned in school to the situation at hand.” Rick felt that he could not have produced the quality of report he did without his academic training. As he put it, “I’ve had insight and things drilled into me about certain concepts and operations management and accounting, information systems that I just wouldn’t have without the education . . . without a doubt.” Rick considered himself a good report writer in part because he had developed solid analytic skills through his education.

In fact, all the Management students indicated that the instruction and practice they had received in report writing as part of their academic study were pivotal in preparing them for writing in the workplace. For example, Lee described a feasibil-
ity plan he had completed for a Management course as an example of the kind of analytic report assignment that had been helpful in preparing him for workplace writing. And, as Rick noted, “By the time I did my [first] work term, I had produced enough and contributed enough to reports . . . that I was fairly confident in how I wanted to do it [a particular report].” Rick also commented that “the professors . . . offer all the help in the world on how to put together your report . . . so that would be instrumental in my ability to do that now.” Twyla noted that her Management professors had a good idea of what would be expected in the workplace because they “have all been out there.” The formal genre knowledge about report writing that Rick had acquired in his studies acted for him not as a straightjacket but as a flexible set of guidelines in composing; as he put it, “In the real world, I keep the template in mind, but I’m much more liable to alter it and mold it and fix it the way I like . . . to fit my situational variables that are different [in] every situation.” In their discussions of workplace writing, none of the Management students mentioned genres other than reports.

The Management students noted that in nearly all their Management courses, they were required to collaborate on reports often running to 40 or more pages.

Another key element in the Management students’ positive assessment of their university preparation for workplace writing was the extensive practice they had received in collaborative writing through their course work. The Management students noted that in nearly all their Management courses, they were required to collaborate on reports often running to 40 or more pages. Twyla characterized these group projects as “very valuable” in helping her develop from a “mediocre” writer to a good writer, and Lee suggested that Management students would benefit from doing even more collaborative projects.

Despite their highly positive perceptions of their university preparation for workplace writing, the Management students felt that professors should attend more carefully to editorial problems in students’ writing. In their experience, professors rarely commented on writing problems and paid scant attention to matters of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Rick commented that “too many people get an okay grade on papers that they should be actually failing because of [poor] grammar and spelling.” Twyla observed that conciseness had been valued in the writing she had done in her Management courses—as it was in the workplace; in contrast, she recalls having to write long essays for Political Science in which she says conciseness was not valued.
Perceptions of Political Science Students

Two of the Political Science students we interviewed were in their 4th year, and one was in her 3rd year of studies. Chris, in his fourth work term with the same federal government department but in different locations, reported that he spent 70% of his workday writing briefs and summaries, cases analyses, letters, and memos. Kevin, a student in his second work term, this time with the federal government after a prior work placement with a provincial government, also estimated that he spent 70% of his workday writing documents including access-to-information responses, briefs, speeches, public information packages, and an online newsletter. Lynne, the student in her 3rd year, was on her fourth work term with the provincial government. Her previous work terms had been with other government departments. She estimated that she spent 95% of her time writing, working on a report of survey results as well as writing letters and summaries of annual reports. Two of the students in this group had taken a course in English literature, the focus of which was analysis of literature rather than writing instruction, and none of the Political Science students had taken a business writing course.

Like the Management students, the Political Science students felt that their university education had provided them with sound research and analytic skills, which formed a solid foundation for the writing—at least the report writing—they were called upon to do in the workplace. When we asked Chris to compare the writing he did in the workplace with the writing he did for his Political Science courses, he described the writing as very similar. He noted, “in Political Science class you have to do research, summarize, and do your own analysis.” In his work-term placement he had to “look through all these files, document everything and figure out how everything fits together, [and] summarize it in 15-20 pages.” The ability to research, summarize, and analyze information that Chris acquired as a university student emerged as central to the writing he was required to do in the workplace. Like Chris, Kevin noted that he had acquired sound research and analytic skills in university; he noted that he had developed analytic skills by doing research papers in which he had to compare different ways of thinking and different theorists, a kind of writing that he says prepared him well for his work term with the government.

Although the Political Science students felt well prepared to undertake the analytic work required in composing reports in the workplace, they did not all feel that they had acquired sufficient knowledge of relevant genre conventions through their university studies. Lynn noted that although her Political Science research methods course had effectively prepared her to analyze survey results, she had had to learn how to format a survey report by looking at other reports in the federal government office where she did her work term. When it came to other workplace genres, the Political Science students reported differing perceptions of their preparation. Chris, for example, felt particularly well prepared to produce the summaries he had to write on the job, whereas Lynne did not. She noted that she had had little experience with summary writing in her university courses. Chris, on the other hand, felt poorly prepared for writing workplace correspondence like letters and memos.
Although Lynne felt that her professors had paid no attention to nonacademic kinds of writing, Kevin’s experience was that at least some of his professors were aware of the kinds of writing students would do on the job. Whether or not their university courses provided instruction and practice in producing particular workplace genres, the Political Science students found that university did not effectively prepare them for the complex realities of workplace writing situations. Kevin, for example, acknowledged his initial surprise at the complex juggling act required to address multiple audiences and to attend to political considerations in workplace writing.

Unlike the Management students, none of the Political Science students mentioned collaborative writing experiences as central in their university studies or as pivotal in their preparation for workplace writing.

Unlike the Management students, none of the Political Science students mentioned collaborative writing experiences as central in their university studies or as pivotal in their preparation for workplace writing. Perhaps this is not surprising given that collaborative assignments are much more common in professional fields like Management than they are in Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines. Like their counterparts in Management, however, students in Political Science felt that their university professors should attend more closely to matters of style and editorial correctness and provide more feedback on students’ writing. All three students noted that their Political Science training had taught them, as Lynne put it, to “stretch everything out to fill 10 pages,” a skill they had to unlearn in the workplace, particularly when writing summaries. In addition, they all commented on how much more feedback they received on their writing in the workplace than they had in their university courses. Chris came back from his work term feeling very strongly that increased feedback from professors would be helpful in improving all aspects of his writing, even when a paper earns a good mark. He noted that because no professor had ever told him that his writing was poor or had asked him to rewrite anything, his academic experiences had left him with the impression that he was a good writer. In the workplace, however, his writing occasionally elicited negative comments and requests to rewrite. In contrast, the relative lack of feedback Kevin had received on his academic writing had left him with little confidence in his writing, so he was surprised to receive compliments on his writing in the workplace.
Perceptions of Communications Studies Students

All of the Communications Studies students we interviewed were in their 4th year. Cheryl and Penny were both in their second work term. Cheryl worked as a technical writer for a large resource company and had previously completed a work placement in a small software company. She said she spent 80% to 90% of her time designing forms and writing an update of an installers’ manual and owners’ manuals. Penny, who was working for a charitable organization after having previously completed a work term in a large oil company, reported spending 60% of her work time writing newsletter articles, press releases and information display materials, and revising a client services manual. Sheila was on her third work term, this time working for the federal government after two previous work terms in health care workplaces. She said she spent 50% of her time writing documents, including press releases, public service announcements, letters, a conference evaluation report, a brochure, and a draft report on policy issues.

As a group, the Communications Studies students appeared to have the strongest preparation for workplace writing. In their Communications program, Sheila, Penny, and Cheryl had all taken courses in both technical writing and public relations. Penny had also taken a course in organizational communications, and both Cheryl and Penny had taken an introductory course in oral and written communication, which they characterized as mainly focused on public speaking. Sheila, who was pursuing a minor in Management, had also completed a course in business communications (the same course taken by the Management students in this study) and research methods courses in both Political Science and Communications. Despite this preparation, the Communications Studies students perceived their university preparation for workplace writing as inadequate. Although they valued the writing instruction they had received in their technical writing and public relations courses in particular, the Communications students felt that their program contained too few courses that, as Cheryl put it, “actually prepare you for work terms . . . [that] teach you these formats and ideas and to know these things [like how to organize manuals].” Sheila, like Penny, echoed Cheryl’s sentiments, commenting, “One course covering feature articles . . . it’s not going to cut it.”

Unlike the Management and Political Science students, none of the Communications students we interviewed made a positive link between the analytic skills they had acquired in their content-area courses and the writing they had been required to do in the workplace. One student, in fact, offered a negative example, questioning the practical value of an academic paper she had written analyzing a kind of ethnic dance as persuasion. Furthermore, the Communications Studies students expressed dissatisfaction with the research skills they had gained from courses in their program. Sheila, for example, had taken a research methods course in her Communications Studies program but felt that the class had not taught her the skills she needed for research writing in the workplace—“how to write a survey . . . doing the databases, SPSS.” She says that she learned more useful research skills from the Political Science research methods course she had taken.
In discussing their preparation for workplace writing, the Communications students focused far more than either the Management or the Political Science students on formal genre knowledge and competence in a range of workplace genres. Penny noted that she had learned how to write summaries in her technical writing course, a skill that she found useful in her work terms, whereas Cheryl acknowledged the value of her technical writing course in teaching her how to write memos, letters, and step-by-step procedures. She characterized her training in writing instructions as excellent preparation for her workplace writing. Despite the store of genre knowledge she had acquired, however, Cheryl felt unprepared to write software manuals in her work placement. She also noted that although her public relations course had prepared her to write business reports and press releases, it had not prepared her to write feature articles; she recalled in her second work term, “running around the library looking for books about how to write... newspaper article.” Sheila, too, had taken the public relations course offered in her program but was disappointed in the lack of practice she got in certain genres. In that course, she says, “you’re supposed to learn feature articles, news releases, PSAs [public service announcements], but we did one feature article, one news release, one PSA.” In her view, that did not constitute adequate preparation for producing those genres in the workplace. When we asked about a published feature article that she had brought along in her portfolio, Sheila said that she had learned more from a handout on writing feature articles provided by the student newspaper office than she had learned in the PR course, saying, “That [handout] was very useful. It was practical. I never would have got something like that from a class.”

Like Cheryl, Sheila had taken a technical writing course in which she learned how to write instructions, but she lamented that the course did not teach students how to write business memos. However, as a Management minor, Sheila had taken the business communications course in the Management faculty, which she described as excellent:

It’s very to the point: this is how you write a memo, this is how you write a business letter, an overhead—never use more than six lines on a page, never have smaller than this font—it’s very practical, and that’s what you need in the business world.

Sheila noted that it was in the business writing course rather than within courses in her Communications program that she had learned how to write a business plan, an assignment that she felt was “very, very useful.”

Although one student mentioned doing a group project in her public relations course, none of the Communications Studies students focused on collaborative writing as an important part of their university preparation for workplace writing—something that the Management students had pointed to as particularly valuable.

One commonality that Communications Studies students shared with the Management and Political Science students was their view that university professors need to demand higher standards of editorial excellence, to stress conciseness, and to provide more feedback on students’ papers. Sheila reported encountering only
one professor who marked “every comma and every grammatical error,” whereas Cheryl noted that in her work term, she had been surprised to learn that things she thought she had been doing right in her university writing were, in fact, incorrect.

**POTENTIAL FACTORS IN DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES IN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS**

Some of the disciplinary differences we found in students’ perceptions of their university preparation for workplace writing clearly related to the nature of the writing instruction and practice students gained in their studies. To probe the potential reasons for these differences, we now examine the differing relationships between theory and practice in Management, Political Science, and Communications Studies. We also consider how students’ expectations of their degrees and of their own roles as writers in the workplace may have affected their perceptions of their university preparation for writing in the workplace.

**THE IMPACT OF THEORY-PRACTICE RELATIONSHIPS**

In this study, students who expressed satisfaction with their preparation for workplace writing pointed to the research and analytic skills they had acquired through their studies as well as to the familiarity they had developed with the particular genres they were called upon to produce in the workplace. Of the students we interviewed, the Management students were the only group in a program that could be described as a professional program. In Management as in other professional fields, theory is grounded in practical issues and, consequently, there is a tight fit between theory and practice. The pragmatic focus of courses within the faculty of Management and the tight integration of theory and practice within Management courses means that in their courses, Management students get ample experience applying theory to practice and producing written reports that require the kinds of research and analysis they will be required to do in the workplace.

In contrast to Management, the links between theory and practice in Political Science are more tenuous, and the Political Science program pursued by the students we interviewed makes no claims to prepare students for a professional career. According to the university program description, Political Science studies should expose students to political theory and issues and comparative government and politics, among other areas. However, through their studies and their academic writing, Political Science students appear to receive significant training and practice in researching and analyzing policy and other pragmatic issues. Apart from a research methods course, students do not learn Political Science writing within a separate course but instead develop their writing and analytic skills through their content-area courses. Our findings suggest that this integrated approach provides students
with practical writing skills that transfer to the workplace; certainly, the Political Science students we spoke to generally felt that the analytic, research, and report writing skills that they had acquired through their university education served them well in their work-term placements.

Of the three fields of study, the links between theory and practice are the most ambiguous in the Communications Studies program. The university’s program description states that the program is “intended to provide an awareness of the cultural impact of communications media, an understanding of research and practice involving communications media, and research and practice in discourse.” It further notes that “while not specifically a professional program, it will help prepare students for careers in both print and electronic journalism, public relations, as well as in business, politics and other related fields.” Unlike the courses in Management, or even Political Science, in which theory is tightly bound to practical analysis, courses in Communications Studies tend to be either theory or practice based, with the courses in research methods, technical writing, public relations, and spoken and written communication falling into the latter category. None of the Communications Studies students we interviewed, unlike the Management and Political Science students, made a positive link between the research and analytic skills they had acquired in their theory-based courses and the writing they had been required to do in the workplace. And although the Communications Studies students valued the genre knowledge they had gained from their practically based courses, they expected much more from these courses—more in-depth instruction in research skills relevant to the workplace, greater coverage of a wider variety of written genres, and much more practice in producing particular kinds of documents. In short, the Communications Studies students apparently expected their university studies to prepare them to undertake careers as communications professionals ready to tackle all kinds of writing tasks in the workplace.

The Impact of Program Descriptions in Eliciting Student Expectations

From program descriptions, to promotional materials, to course titles, universities send out intentional and unintentional messages about their academic programs, messages that shape students’ expectations. In turn, these expectations influence students’ perceptions of how well their programs have prepared them for the workplace. Whereas the Management program at the university where this study was conducted promises to prepare students for a professional career, the Political Science program makes no such promises, and as a result, Political Science students would not be likely to develop unrealistic expectations about the practical skills with which they will exit their program. However, the ambiguous description of the nature of the Communications Studies program may lead students to expect a professional preparation when, in fact, the general thrust of the program is theoretical, focusing more on communication theories and cultural impacts of communication media than on developing the writing skills students
would need to take on careers in journalism, public relations, or other writing-related fields. At an even more basic level, the program name “Communications Studies” may suggest to students that they will graduate with expertise in the practical skills of communication rather than in communication theory. Perhaps it should not be surprising that the Communications Studies students we spoke to appeared to possess more demanding and potentially more unrealistic expectations of their university preparation for workplace writing than students in either Management or Political Science.

The Impact of Student Expectations Related to Workplace Roles

Students’ expectations of their academic programs undoubtedly shape their expectations of themselves as future graduates and temper the way they perceive their experiences in workplace settings. Relevant here is Couture and Rymer’s helpful (1993) distinction between “professionals who write”—those who write as part of their profession (as, for example, engineers or managers)—and “career writers”—those who write as their profession (as, for example, journalists or technical communicators). While Management and Political Science students are more likely to see themselves as “professionals who write,” Communications Studies students are more likely to see themselves as aspiring “career writers.” Rick, for example, clearly saw himself as possessing expert knowledge in the field of Management, and he viewed writing in the workplace as integral to accomplishing managerial tasks. He and his fellow Management students (as well as the Political Science students) would likely view themselves as falling into the category of “professionals who write,” those for whom writing demonstrates their competence in another profession” (Couture & Rymer, 1993, p. 5).

When it comes to writing in the workplace, the stakes are much higher for those, like the Communications Studies students, who tend to see themselves as, or aspire to become, “career writers.” For them, writing becomes “a direct demonstration of their professional/technical competence” (Couture & Rymer, 1993, p. 5). Such perceptions of presumed writing competence among career writers tend to be reinforced within workplace contexts, as suggested by Anson and Forsberg’s (1990) study of the workplace writing experiences reported by the English and Journalism student interns. As Anson and Forsberg put it, “Our interns . . . were expected to know already how to execute assigned tasks on their own” and were “reluctant to show how much they did not know by asking for information” (p. 212). Couture and Rymer’s distinction helps to explain why Communications Studies students might have much higher expectations of their university preparation for workplace writing and of themselves as writers in the workplace. When their writing fails to measure up, or when they struggle to master unfamiliar genres, they may experience “frustration and failure” (Anson & Forsberg, 1990, p. 214) and perceive their university training as inadequate—even if their program does not present itself as a professional program.
PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our findings suggest that despite the pessimism a number of writers have expressed about universities’ ability to prepare students for writing in the workplace (e.g., Dias et al., 1999), universities can play an important role in helping students develop the skills and knowledge they need to become successful writers in the workplace. Besides the work term and internship programs they can offer students, universities can provide valuable writing instruction and practice within the context of discipline-based content-area courses, research methods courses, and writing courses. In this section, we explore the pedagogical implications of our study in more detail and suggest ways in which universities can better prepare students in all disciplines for writing in the workplace.

Integrating Writing Instruction Into Content-Area Courses

Our study suggests that extensive writing practice within content-area courses—especially of workplace genres—leaves students feeling better prepared for writing in the workplace than does writing practice gained from writing courses. Certainly, according to the students in our study, the writing practice and skills that students gained in research, analysis, and report writing in Management and Political Science courses appeared to transfer effectively to their workplace writing. Integrating writing instruction into content-area courses reflects the principles of the Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movements and is a strategy supported by a number of researchers (e.g., Schreiber, 1993; Vest et al., 1995). Freedman (1994), for example, found that the disciplinary conversations and the enabling environment within law courses encouraged the students she studied to enact disciplinary ways of thinking; she argues that

this kind of shaping is characteristic of many, if not most, content-area or disciplinary classrooms, and it is in this way, rather than through attempts at explicit formulation of rules, that formal instruction elicits the learning of new genres (p. 201).

Vest et al. (1995) endorsed such an integrated approach, arguing in their study of new engineering hires that “the model of providing additional, separate communication-related courses as preparation for the workplace may not be the most appropriate” (p. 16).

The preliminary findings of our study suggest that within the discipline of Communications Studies, students might benefit if instructors in theory-based courses recast certain assignments as reports for particular audiences rather than as academic research papers, a genre that has little currency in the workplace. While researching and reporting on particular communications policy and media issues for real or hypothetical audiences, Communications Studies students could develop their rhetorical awareness while acquiring increased familiarity with the
report genre, both essential elements in workplace writing. In both content-area and writing courses, students also benefit from assignments in which they undertake research and writing tasks for real workplace audiences, a practice that is common in senior Management courses.

Fostering Research and Analytic Skills

Our study also leads us to conclude that university courses play a significant role in preparing students for workplace writing by providing them with instruction and practice in research and analytic skills. The students we interviewed said that their education should equip them with skills in locating information, writing good surveys and conducting surveys and other kinds of research, analyzing quantitative research findings using programs such as SPSS, and synthesizing research results in reports geared for particular audiences. From the students' responses, we conclude that even within writing courses, instruction and assignments should focus not simply on the formal features of particular genres but also on the research and analytic skills that inform particular genres such as feasibility analyses, evaluation reports, proposals, and business plans. If postsecondary institutions are to prepare their graduates for workplace writing, they must facilitate students' acquisition of the kind of procedural knowledge—including research and analytic skills—that underlies competence in workplace genres.

Introducing Students to the Features of Workplace Genres

The students in our study reported feeling frustrated when they entered the workplace without basic knowledge about how to structure and compose letters, memos, feature articles, survey research reports, and software manuals. This finding suggests that writing, research methods, and even content-area courses can play a valuable role in familiarizing students with the basic formal features of common workplace genres. Tacit learning of genres can and will occur once students are immersed in the workplace, (Freedman, 1994) but such learning—typically through trial and error—can be slow and frustrating. Although theorists are split on the value of explicit instruction, Teich (1987) claimed that research supports “the conclusion that domain-specific knowledge in rhetoric and writing must be identified contextually and taught directly so as to become procedural [i.e., automatic]” (p. 202). Even Freedman (1994), who generally discounts the value of explicit instruction in genres, acknowledges the possibility that such instruction might enhance learning for some students, “but only when such discussions are presented while students are engaged in authentic reading and writing tasks, involving the targeted genre” (p. 204). Of course, instruction in genre forms should never portray genres simply as textual forms incorporating characteristic features or present genre conventions as decontextualized absolutes. Explicit instruction in typical genre features simply provides a foundation or a schema upon which students can build fur-
Imparting an Understanding of the Complex Nature of Genres and of Genre Acquisition

Through their studies, university students across the disciplines should come to appreciate written genres not just as written texts with characteristic features but as forms of socially situated symbolic action that encompasses “a set of texts, the composing processes involved in creating these texts, the reading practices used to interpret them, and the social roles performed by writers and readers” (Paré & Smart, 1994, p. 147). Instructors should help students to understand that although their education provides a basis for the acquisition of nonacademic genres, the classroom cannot impart to them everything they will need to know in order to write competently in a workplace setting. As MacKinnon (1993) concluded in his study of new employees at the Bank of Canada, the “simple (but perhaps counterintuitive) fact that their writing will likely develop in important ways ‘even’ after graduation may be the most important lesson of all” for students (p. 54). In particular, the Communication Studies students in our study might have benefited from a more realistic understanding of the limits of the classroom in helping them acquire competence in workplace genres.

At a more practical level, our study suggests that university instructors should introduce students to composing strategies that will be helpful as they learn to enact genre as a contextualized rhetorical strategy in their workplace writing. Students should be encouraged to adopt a rhetorical approach to writing—to consider their audience and the complexities of their writing context carefully when composing texts. They should also be encouraged to adopt a problem-solving approach in which they “methodically consult such sources as managers, supervisors, members of their prospective audience, and ‘gatekeepers’ of the information they need for their documents, including clients and technical or scientific personnel” (Lutz, 1989, p. 125). Students should become comfortable seeking out models of workplace genres, soliciting comments on their writing from their colleagues, and using feedback critically as they revise their writing.

Providing Practice in Written Genres

As the students we interviewed noted, genre knowledge by itself is not enough; competence and confidence in producing particular genres come only with ample practice. All the Management students we interviewed attributed their sound preparation for workplace writing in part to the sheer amount of practice they had had in report writing in their Management courses. Although not all programs can offer such intensity of practice in particular genres, opportunities for increased practice can be built into specific courses. For example, in writing courses that necessarily cover a range of genres, students might gain additional practice in particular genres.
through weekly writing labs, as suggested by one of the students we interviewed. Of course, like all writing assignments, writing labs should be carefully formulated to focus students’ attention on audience and context. Writing assignments that strip away rhetorical context imply that formal genre features take priority over rhetorical considerations and may reinforce overly simplistic ideas about the nature of workplace writing.

Encouraging Collaborative Writing

The experience of the Management students we interviewed argues forcefully for the inclusion of more collaborative writing assignments in academic programs. Collaborative writing is common in workplace settings (Faigley & Miller, 1982; Lunsford & Ede, 1990), and collaborative writing in the classroom can prepare students for the realities of composing processes in the workplace in which multiple readers and writers shape a document. The literature suggests a number of further benefits for collaborative writing in academic settings, including fostering a heightened awareness and understanding of audience and social context in writing (Schreiber, 1993; Wallace, 1994). Wallace (1994) found that collaborative planning sessions allowed student writers to provide “several different kinds of instructional scaffolds for each other” by encouraging “prolonged discussion of specific discourse conventions” (p. 55). Opportunities to discuss writing and to observe other writers’ approaches as well as to receive “intellectual stimulation” and “emotional support” (p. 65)—benefits found by Lunsford and Ede in their 1990 study of collaborative writing in the workplace—are likely to accrue in the context of collaborative writing activities in the classroom as well as in the workplace. Research suggests that writers who are unaccustomed to working collaboratively and to dealing with feedback from others on their writing may run into difficulties when they are expected to collaborate in workplace writing contexts (Freedman & Adam, 2000; Locker, 1992). And, as Vest et al. (1995) have argued, collaborative writing in academic settings can help students develop the “vital skill” of “knowing when and how to elicit information from co-workers” (p. 16).

Providing Ample Feedback on Writing and Demanding High Editorial Standards

Our findings suggest that instructors in all courses should provide more feedback on student writing. The comments of the students we interviewed suggested that lack of feedback appears to slow students’ development as writers and that lack of feedback can give students a false sense of their writing competence. The student writers we interviewed acknowledge the value of feedback, whether it is positive or negative and whether it addresses aspects of writing particular to a genre, for example, organization, analysis, or format, or lower level common editorial concerns such as punctuation or usage. In fact, like those surveyed by Vest et al. (1995), the students we interviewed advocated for far higher editorial standards in academic
writing and far greater attention to editorial matters in feedback on writing. As Teich (1987) noted, competence in editorial matters such as word use, spelling, grammar, and conventions like punctuation may transfer to new writing situations. Using an approach to teaching grammar and mechanics in context such as that advocated by Noguchi (1991) could satisfy students' requests for more explicit grammar knowledge while avoiding the pitfalls of decontextualized grammar instruction.

In summary, it appears that to develop competence in a workplace genre, writers must become familiar with the basic formal conventions of the genre; acquire the procedural knowledge, for example, the research and analytic skills needed to produce the genre; and have opportunities for practicing the genre (particularly in collaboration with other writers) and for receiving feedback on their performance. However, as genre theory predicts, if writers are to develop expertise in workplace writing, they must also understand genre as a contextualized rhetorical strategy, and they must learn to enact the local norms, social roles, and composing practices in their workplaces. Although instructors in university programs can refine their pedagogy within writing and content-area courses to support students' development as nonacademic writers, they cannot do it all: Experience writing in the workplace remains vital for students to fully appreciate the contextualized nature of genre and its acquisition and to become good workplace writers.

Promoting Work-Term and Internship Options

Whenever possible, universities should encourage students to pursue cooperative education and internship options in which they gain experience working in their chosen fields. Besides enhancing students' future employability, work terms situate students as "legitimate peripheral participants" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), provide a wealth of practical writing experience, expose students to the socially situated nature of written genres, develop their rhetorical awareness and organizational savvy, and generally provide them with extensive feedback on their writing, all of which accelerate their development as writers. The students we interviewed—in particular the Communications Studies students—felt that work-term experience had been indispensable to them. One even suggested making such experience a mandatory part of the Communications Studies program.

To ease students' transition and to optimize the benefits they gain from work experience, academic programs might do well to implement writing internship courses, such as those described by Anson and Forsberg (1990), Lutz (1989), Dias et al. (1999), and Smart (2000). In such courses, taken concurrently with internships or work-term placements, students can learn from each other's experiences as they discuss reviewer comments and revisions of work-related drafts (Adam, 2000), seek guidance on writing issues, reflect on their learning experiences through the lens of theory and research on workplace writing, and come to a fuller practical and theoretical understanding of the social action of writing in the workplace.
Work-term placements and internships appear to promote the development and transfer of writing skills in both directions. Although our study focused on the way in which the writing skills and knowledge students gained in university prepared them for workplace writing, we were surprised to find the extent to which the perceived transfer often flowed in the opposite direction—for students in all three disciplines. These findings lend further support to work-term and internship programs. Chris, for example, found that the legal vocabulary and the improved editorial and writing skills he acquired in his work terms—especially the ability to make his documents flow well—translated into better grades in his Political Science studies. Kevin, also in Political Science, found that his experience editing a newsletter and writing briefs and speeches taught him the value of conciseness, and as a result, he says, his academic writing became more concise. Cheryl, a Communications Studies student, noted, “Instead of school helping my work terms, I think my work terms helped my school because I really think I came back a better writer and a more concise writer.” In particular, she commented on her improved sense of organization in writing. Lynne found that the practice she got in writing summaries in her work term paid off in her following semester at university when she was asked to summarize scholarly articles in her Political Science courses. Twyla, a Management student, said that through her work term, she learned a lot more about research; she credits help she received from the company librarian where she worked.

Perhaps more important than the gains in writing skills that these students brought back with them to the classroom were the attitudinal changes. Chris, for example, said that his work-term experience impressed upon him the importance of writing well, and he noted that since coming back from his last work term, he had earned all A’s in his university courses. Both Rick and Twyla remarked that their work terms gave them a stronger appreciation for the writing they do in their Management courses as they now see such writing as a valid form of practice in developing their workplace writing skills. Sheila came back from her work term with a renewed enthusiasm for practical writing courses in her Communications Studies program but found that she was not quite as interested in Communications theory courses.

CONCLUSION

Genre theory has been instrumental in illuminating the socially situated nature of writing, but as it has done so, it has complicated our notions of how writing can be taught and has led some (e.g., Diaz et al., 1999; Freedman, 1994) to argue that written genres cannot be meaningfully learned outside the specific contexts in which they function. Such a view suggests that writing instructors and those who teach written genres within the context of professional or content-area courses should hold out little hope that their efforts in the classroom will translate into good writing in the workplace. However, our study of how nine university students in
work-term placements perceived their university preparation for workplace writing offers a more optimistic view. The perceptions of these students, drawn from the disciplines of Management, Political Science, and Communication Studies, suggest that the classroom can play an important role in preparing students for the workplace writing they will do. In particular, the students we interviewed felt well prepared for workplace writing when their university studies had familiarized them with the formal features of relevant workplace genres, given them a solid grounding in the procedural skills of research and analysis integral to certain genres, and provided them with ample opportunities for practice of particular genres, especially when that practice involved substantial collaborative assignments. The students we interviewed felt that they would have benefited even more had their professors provided more opportunities for collaborative writing, given them more feedback on their writing, and imposed higher editorial standards in assessing their written work.

Our research has also led us to the view that instructors must raise students’ rhetorical awareness and impart an understanding of the complex nature of written genres as informed by current genre theory. Such an understanding may help ease students’ transition into workplace writing by helping students acknowledge the role of the workplace itself in equipping newcomers with the knowledge and skills they need to write successfully in particular workplace contexts. Such an understanding may help students develop realistic expectations about their academic preparation for workplace writing and ease the frustration of students (like our Communications Studies students) who may see themselves as “career writers” (Couture & Rymer, 1993) but whose academic programs do not explicitly promise preparation for a professional writing career. Finally, our research strongly supports university programs that encourage students to pursue work-term and internship placements as part of their programs of study. Such programs not only provide valuable workplace experience for students but also can help students become better writers when they return to the classroom.

As with all research, the present study has limitations worth noting. The study’s findings are limited by the small sample size and by the fact that the students’ perceptions reflect their individual experiences in particular programs at particular points in time. Even within a single institution, students’ experiences vary according to the constellation of variables that make each offering of courses within a program unique. In addition, self-reports are only one measure of the effectiveness of particular courses or programs of study in preparing students for the workplace and may not predict either students’ performance in the workplace or the perceptions of future students. We therefore cannot generalize from our study to a broader population of students in similar programs at other universities. Instead, our goal in this initial exploratory investigation was to identify significant issues in the university preparation of students for workplace writing and areas for future research. Despite its limitations, this study contributes to our growing understanding of how well universities prepare—or are perceived to prepare—students for writing in the workplace. In conclusion, this exploratory case study provided a limited but sug-
gestive glimpse into the differences across disciplines of students’ perceptions of their preparation for workplace writing. The disciplinary patterns that we found could be studied with a larger student sample, representing more disciplines and more postsecondary institutions. Such cross-disciplinary studies may yield a much richer picture of students’ perceived preparation for workplace writing, allow us to trace more fully the underlying reasons for cross-disciplinary differences in students’ perceptions, and provide us with a more complete picture of the pedagogical role that universities can play in preparing students for workplace writing.

APPENDIX

Questions for Semistructured Interviews

1. How old are you?
2. What year of study and major?
3. Where is (was) your current or most recent work term? Previous work terms?
4. What is (was) your position?
5. How much of your work time is spent writing?
6. What documents did you write?
7. Tell us about (or show us) a document you wrote on your work term.
8. How much direction did you get from your supervisor about writing?
9. What kind of feedback did you receive from your supervisor about your writing?
10. Did you get feedback about grammar?
11. How different was the workplace writing from your university writing experiences?
12. What surprised you about your workplace writing experiences?
13. What writing courses did you take in university?
14. What kind of assignments did you do in these courses?
15. How well did you do in them?
16. Do you think your university education prepared you for the workplace writing you did?
17. Should you have been better prepared?
18. What do you suggest should be changed or included?
19. Do your professors understand what will be required of you in the workplace?
20. Do you think your professors should provide more concrete training?
21. Do you get sufficient feedback from your professors?
22. What specific practical writing skills did you learn in your university courses?
23. How much writing did you do in your content-area courses?
24. Did your workplace writing experience improve your academic writing?
25. In retrospect, is there anything you wish you had known before entering the workplace?
26. Have we missed anything you would like to tell us?
REFERENCES


