

## CHAPTER 9

# STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRANSFER OF RHETORICAL KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN DIGITAL SELF-SPONSORED WRITING AND ACADEMIC WRITING: THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC CONTEXTS AND REFLECTION

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We know that students engage in more self-sponsored kinds of digital writing—such as texting, emailing, and writing Facebook status updates or twitter posts—than ever before (Grabill et al., 2010; Lenhart, 2012; Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith & Macgill, 2008; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi & Gasser, 2013; Purcell, Buchanan & Friedrich, 2013; Stanford Study of Writing, n.d.; Yancey, 2009). With the increase in this kind of student writing, there has also come an increase in speculation about whether or not digital self-sponsored writing contributes to the decline of students' academic writing abilities (Finley, 2014; McWhorter, 2013). Potentially, many people—such as parents, teachers, students, and employers—have a stake in determining whether any kind of transfer occurs between the self-sponsored digital writing and academic writing of students. While the more common knee-jerk reaction seems to be assuming that self-sponsored digital writing negatively affects more formal kinds of academic or even professional writing, it is possible that the reverse occurs as well, that the self-sponsored digital writing that students engage in so frequently might have a positive effect, or could have a positive effect, on their academic writing. The *Elon Statement on Writing Transfer* recognizes this possibility in its call for additional research into the in-development working principle that “the transfer of rhetorical knowledge and strategies between self-sponsored and academic writing can be encouraged by designing academic writing opportunities with authentic audiences and purposes and by asking students to engage in meta-cognition” (2015, p. 6; Appendix A).

While there is a rich body of research exploring the complex interaction between different discursive practices of students, much of this research is not about digital self-sponsored writing specifically (Roozen, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) or deliberately interested in self-sponsored writing (Herrington & Curtis, 2000; McCarthy, 1987; Sternglass, 1997). Many of the Pew Research Internet Projects have provided valuable insight into the use of digital tools by teenagers and high schoolers, as well as their attitudes—and those of their parents' and teachers'—toward these tools. The studies have not, however, specifically studied whether or not any kind of writing or rhetorical knowledge transfers between self-sponsored digital writing and academic writing. For example, Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich's "The Impact of Digital Tools on Student Writing and How Writing is Taught in Schools" concludes that digital technologies help students improve their "personal expression and creativity, broadening the audience for their written material, and encouraging teens to write more" (2013, p. 1) in new formats, and also warns about the danger of the "'creep' of informal style into formal writing assignments" (2013, p. 1), but it does not make claims about the kinds of rhetorical knowledge students might transfer between the two different kinds of writing.

There also exists a fair amount of personal anecdote surrounding this topic. For example, the lore includes conversations about banning laptops and cell phones from writing classrooms because the writing that occurs with these technologies is assumed to be disruptive or destructive. Popular media accounts often focus on how newer ways of writing, or social media forms of communication, are destroying students' abilities to write complete sentences (Hansen, 2013; Maples, 2009; Singleton-Rickman, 2009). These kinds of discussions assume that transfer (although they do not use this term) occurs—with a negative effect—between students' self-sponsored digital and academic writing. Further, they play into claims made regularly over the years about the dramatic demise of students' writing abilities.

Scholars like Yancey (1998, 2009) and Lunsford (n.d.) have argued that we need more research into the actual digital writing activities of students in order to better understand the kinds of writing knowledge they acquire on their own, so that we can design updated pedagogies that actually take into account the range of student writing experiences. Lunsford says:

If we look beyond the hand-wringing about young people and literacy today, beyond the view that paints them as either brain-damaged by technology or as cogs in the latest race to the top, we will see that the changes brought about by the digital revolution are just that: changes. These changes alter

the very grounds of literacy as the definition, nature, and scope of writing are all shifting away from the consumption of discourse to its production across a wide range of genre and media . . . away from a single static standard of correctness to a situated understanding of audience and context and purpose for writing. Luckily, young people are changing as well, moving swiftly to join in this expanded culture of writing (n.d., p. 3)

The emphasis on a shift from singular correctness to “situated understanding of audience and context and purpose for writing” is especially significant when considering that students’ digital conversations constantly shift across media as well as audience, context, and purpose. Lunsford concludes that “what students need in facing these challenges is not derision or dismissal but solid and informed instruction. And that’s where the real problem may lie—not with student semi-literacy but with that of their teachers” (Lunsford, n.d., p. 3). I extend this even further and argue that any such “solid and informed instruction” must be informed by evidence of whether students transfer rhetorical ideas and strategies between their digital self-sponsored writing and their academic writing; otherwise, any writing instruction is in danger of being obsolete and failing to address the kinds of knowledge students arrive in our classrooms already having developed as a result of their very active digital writing lives.

As a way to collect data-based evidence that could speak to the kinds of concerns raised by technology-alarmists, as well as the scholars like Yancey and Lunsford calling for more research, this study asks the following questions:

1. Do students transfer rhetorical strategies (audience analysis; kairotic understanding; genre and delivery choices) between digital self-sponsored and academic writing?
2. Does asking students to engage in reflection about the rhetorical strategies used in both kinds of writing increase their ability to transfer such knowledge?

This study uses the term *self-sponsored* writing in line with the way scholars such as Yancey (1998, 2009) and Roozen (2008, 2009a, 2009b) have used the term, to mean writing that students choose to do (and are not required to do) and that students are not officially taught to write in academic or educational settings. This definition of self-sponsored is not limited to writing that students do only for themselves; rather, it includes writing they do for other people and real audiences. In all cases, students do this writing because they choose to do it, not because they have been assigned in a school or professional context to do

it. Often, students engage in a kind of self-directed apprenticeship as they become more skilled in writing in these self-sponsored ways (Yancey, 2009). While self-sponsored writing refers to both digital writing, such as text messaging and Twitter posts, and paper-based writing, such as poetry written in notebooks and reminders written on sticky notes, this study focuses on the digital, and especially social media types, of self-sponsored writing.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT STUDENTS' SELF-SPONSORED WRITING LIVES

### THE VARIETY OF STUDENTS' WRITING LIVES AND SELF-SPONSORED WRITING

The writing lives of students—their entire writing lives, not just their academic writing lives—deserve further attention. Yancey's (2009) and Mueller's (2009) work have found that while students are writing more self-sponsored and digital writing than ever before, the nature of how this writing is produced has changed and traditional writing pedagogies may not apply; academia as a whole and writing studies in particular have not adequately studied or responded to these changes. Yancey focuses on the need to study the entire writing lives of students, especially the new writing processes that students develop on their own outside of school, as a way to reinvent writing pedagogy in classrooms before it becomes entirely out of date and out of step with the rich writerly knowledge students bring to school as a result of their self-sponsored writing apprenticeships. Mueller emphasizes that the self-sponsored digital writing of students creates a kind of *digital underlife* (a concept adapted for composition and rhetoric by Brooke, 1987, from the sociologist Goffman, 1961, 1963)—which refers to those digital activities that students engage in outside of the classroom as a way to assert their identities and that are criticized for diverting student attention away from teacher-assigned tasks. He asserts that these digital activities are often a rich part of students' writing lives, even though he resists the idea that this kind of writing should be integrated into the classroom, lest its power be undermined.

Roozen's (2009a, 2009b) longitudinal and case-based research, which examines different kinds of self-sponsored student writing such as poetry and stand-up comedy, has found that there is significant interplay between the extracurricular and academic literate lives of students (2008, 2009a, 2009b). He says that "our sense of ourselves as literate persons is forged in the interplay of multiple encounters with literacy, private as well as public, and how authoring a literate life means engaging in the ongoing work of reconciling the conflicts and synergies among them" (Roozen, 2009b, p. 541). While Roozen's distinction

between private and public literate activities does not perfectly parallel self-sponsored and academic writing, it does point out that students are part of multiple literate activity systems that are in conflict and require reconciliation to achieve an identity as a literate person.

Researchers conducting collaborative studies across multiple secondary institutions have repeatedly found that students are writing more self-sponsored writing, including digital forms, than ever before, with a greater variety of media and with greater flexibility across media than ever before (Grabill et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2016; Purcell et al., 2013; Stanford Study of Writing, n.d.). What all of these scholars have concluded, either directly or indirectly, is that writing studies lags behind in understanding writing processes and rhetorical strategies that students develop, before they even arrive at high school or college, through their self-sponsored digital writing. At the heart of the matter is this: We have little understanding, if any, about how students' self-sponsored digital writing and academic writing affect each other.

## LORE VERSUS RESEARCH ON DIGITAL SELF-SPONSORED WRITING

There are many online examples of lore warning us about how digital self-sponsored writing damages the academic writing of students, and the discussions on text messaging and social media are representative of these claims. One online news forum posted an article about how texting may hurt students' ability to read and write in "proper" ways (Maples, 2009), and a multimedia editor at *The Week* argues that "the reliance on text speak and compressed language necessary for Twitter seems to be hard to break even in the face of, say, a passing grade" (Hansen, 2013). However, Drouin and Davis' (2009) research demonstrates that between students who use *text speak* (short-hand abbreviations of words) and those who do not in their text messaging, there were no significant differences between the standardized literacy scores of these two groups. It is interesting to note, though, that more than half of the 80 participants believed that text speak was indeed hindering their ability to write in academic English, even though they also reported that they would not use text speak when communicating with professors via email. This suggests that students themselves also believe in the negative lore about digital self-sponsored writing.

## WRITING TRANSFER

This study seeks to examine, in part, the non-academic or self-sponsored writing activity of students. As such, it is interested in determining what kinds, if any, of boundary-crossings occur (Moore, 2012). In general, writing transfer research

has found that students do not expect writing abilities or skills to transfer from course to course or from courses to professional context (Bergman & Zepernick, 2007; Driscoll, 2011), which implies students would also not expect writing abilities or skills to transfer from digital self-sponsored writing, typically written outside of academic contexts, to academic writing.

### **NEAR, MID, AND FAR TRANSFER & TRANSFER BY AFFORDANCES**

The scholarship on transfer makes a distinction between near, mid, and far transfer, with each category representing an increasingly far “stretch” or unfamiliar context in which to transfer the skills or knowledge in question. Near transfer is the transfer of knowledge or skills between very similar contexts, while far transfer is the transfer of knowledge or skills between contexts that seem very different from one another (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). Similarly, the research on transfer affordances focuses on the extent to which a person learns something in a particular situation and the extent to which the transfer of skills or knowledge is facilitated when the person is in a situation with similar affordances (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). What is important in this model is that the person must be able to recognize the similarity in situations, or the affordances available, so that she or he may facilitate the transfer. This research suggests the important role context plays in the transfer of knowledge and skills; both similarity of context and the ability of the person to recognize similarities is a factor in whether or not, or to what extent, transfer occurs.

### **ACTIVITY THEORY AND CONTEXT**

While academic writing has long been recognized as a valid activity worthy of study, activity theory gives us a way to understand the different kinds of self-sponsored digital writing as significant, complex communicative moments as well. According to Kain and Wardle, “For those of us interested in rhetorical theory, the most helpful aspect of activity theory is the way it helps us see more fully all the aspects of a situation and community that influence how people use the tools of language and genre” (n. d., p. 1). According to activity theory, students move from activity system to activity system, each with its own set of expectations and ways to communicate, each with its own objective or purpose, and each with its own set of tools (Russell, 1997). Kain and Wardle also say that “activity theory provides us with very specific aspects of context to look at as we consider the various factors that influence and change the tool of writing,” and this study takes seriously the self-sponsored digital writing of students as an activity system which “change(s) the tool of writing” (n.d., p. 1).

In her review of transfer theories, Moore (2012) notes that writing-related transfer studies include studies of academic and workplace contexts, focusing on the knowledge that is needed to be successful in each context. She also notes, however, that the field of writing studies has yet to determine how knowledge from these different contexts is valued: “Once these (perhaps, conflicting) priorities are addressed, scholars still face the question of how knowledge transfers—if it even does” (“Questions About,” para. 5). This study seeks to extend writing-related transfer research into the realm of self-sponsored writing contexts, to value the kinds of rhetorical knowledge that students develop in these realms, and to consider whether this knowledge is transferred into academic contexts, as well.

## METHODS

Although surveys of student writing experiences and interviews are methods commonly used in writing transfer studies (Moore, 2012) a common problem among transfer studies is determining how exactly one knows that transfer occurred—and this study sidesteps this complication by not attempting to determine whether or not the transfer of rhetorical knowledge actually occurred between the self-sponsored and academic writing of students. Rather, these methods were selected as a way to get a general picture, a very broad snapshot, of student perceptions—what students themselves thought was happening—to determine whether or not they make any connections between their writing choices and strategies when writing self-sponsored and academic texts. Given the scholarship that suggests students’ self-sponsored writing lives deserve further study and likely affect the store of writerly knowledge they build over time and outside of the classroom, studies that focus on student perceptions of their non-academic writing lives are an appropriate place to begin.

For these reasons, to gain a general “lay of the land” of students’ perceptions of the transfer of rhetorical knowledge between digital self-sponsored writing and academic writing, I used a combination of surveys and case study interviews in which students referenced self-sponsored and academic writing samples they brought with them. Although smaller in sample size, this study builds on several larger-scale studies that sought to create a broad map of understanding of student writing behaviors and/or strategies (Grabill et al., 2010; Lenhart et al., 2008; Madden et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2016; Purcell et al., 2013; Stanford Study of Writing, n.d.). Similarly, the case study interview component of this methodology reflects other transfer research methodology (see, for instance, Gorzelsky, Driscoll, Paszek, Jones, and Hayes, this volume), as well as studies that observed participant reflections on their writing (Beyer, Gillmore & Fisher, 2007; Moore, 2012; Yancey, 1998).

## RECRUITMENT AND POPULATION

Undergraduate participants were recruited through emails sent to students in several first-year writing and English senior seminar classes via class instructors who were willing to forward my email invitation to their students. The goal was to recruit students at both the beginning and the end of their college careers; no effort was made to control the student study population by gender, race, or major. The email briefly explained that the study would require them to complete a paper survey about their demographics and writing behaviors, participate in an individual interview, and bring two pieces of their own writing to discuss during the interview (one self-sponsored and one academic piece of writing). The email also informed students that the entire process would take about one hour, that participants who completed the process would receive a \$15 gift certificate, and that they were invited to email me to set up individual times to complete the survey and conduct the interview.

Ten students from across all four years of study responded to the email inquiry and completed the interview and survey process; although only first-year writing and senior-seminar classes were targeted, first-year students with sophomore status and junior-year students taking their senior seminar early replied and participated in the study. The number of first-year/sophomore and junior/senior students was even at five participants in each category. The gender breakdown—one male and nine females—generally reflects the overall demographic of Elon students. Additional information on each participant can be found in Table 9.1.

## SURVEY AND CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS

Participants first completed a paper survey that asked demographic questions about their age, year in school, gender, and racial identification, as well as questions about what kinds of writing they do most often. This survey asked some similar questions as previous studies (e.g., Grabill et al., 2010), as a way to get a general sense of whether or not the participant population had similar writing habits as participants in these other studies, which did turn out to be the case.

The following interview questions were designed to invite participants to reflect on the rhetorical decisions or strategies they used while composing these different texts in different contexts and for different audiences:

- Who is the audience for the piece of writing?
- In what ways do you take your audience into account when you are writing?
- What is the purpose of this writing?



- How often do you do this kind of writing?
- How long have you been writing this genre?
- How do you know if your writing for this genre is effective?
- How much do you enjoy this writing (1–5 scale)?
- Does the composing technology you use to create this genre impact your writing?

During the individual interviews, I asked the participants the same set of questions twice, first for their self-sponsored writing and then a second time for their academic writing. While I was interested in participant responses to these questions, I also wanted to get them talking and reflecting out loud about their rhetorical writing choices.

I then asked participants to reflect on and compare and contrast their self-sponsored and academic writing. The questions were:

- Are there any similarities/differences in regard to
- How/when/why you start writing?
- Your writing process?
- Where you write? How long you write? When you stop?
- How you think about audience or appeal to your audience?
- How you use evidence?
- How you use humor?
- How you select words?
- Which would you prefer to write, writing outside of school or academic writing? Why?
- Which do you care more about? Why?
- Are there elements of one kind of writing you wish were in the other?
- Do you see any connections between these two kinds of writing in your lives?

As with the first set of questions, while I was interested in how participants responded to these questions, I also asked them as a way to get the students talking about and reflecting on their rhetorical writing decisions. This second set of questions elicited many fascinating responses which, for the most part, are not included in the current study because they deal with content too distinct from this article's focus. However, participant responses to two of the questions (Are there any similarities/differences between your digital self-sponsored and academic writing in regard to how you think about audience or appeal to your audience? How you select words?) were coded and included in the results of this study because they generated answers that were pertinent to this study's focus on rhetorical writing choices.

**Table 9.1. Participant demographics and texts**

Participant	Gender	Year in School	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Digital Self-Sponsored Writing Brought to Interview	Academic Writing Brought to Interview
1	Female	First-year	18	White	Blog	Literary analysis paper
2	Female	Junior	20	White	Facebook posts	Analysis paper
				Black/ African- American		
3	Female	Senior	22	White	Text messages	Travel writing
4	Female	Sophomore	19	White	Text messages	Philosophy paper
5	Female	Sophomore	19	White	Email	Classroom observation
6	Male	Sophomore	19	White	Text messages	Evaluative argument
7	Female	First-year	18	White	Facebook posts	Literary analysis paper
8	Female	Junior	20	White	Blog	Analysis paper
9	Female	Senior	21	White	Text messages	Literary analysis paper
10	Female	Senior	22	White	Text messages	Analysis paper

## QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

I used generative coding for the interview data; the survey data was used to report on demographic information only. I first read through two of the 10 interviews to identify common themes in the student responses. At this point, I identified that much of the data referred to rhetorical features of audience awareness, purposes for writing, and ways of determining writing effectiveness. I then re-read and coded the first two interviews again, coding instances of strong and weak audience awareness, purposes for writing, and ways of determining writing effectiveness. During this second pass through the first two interviews, I also generated secondary codes that added further detail to the primary codes; so, for example, strong audience awareness could be further identified as revising visual design for a particular audience's needs (code "visual design") or adjusting content based on multiple audiences (code "multiple audiences"). Each primary code of strong or weak audience awareness, purposes for writing, and ways of determining writing effectiveness also had an "other" code for comments that

**Table 9.2. Primary codes**

	Audience Awareness		Understanding of Effectiveness		Understanding of Purpose	
	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak
<b>Academic Writing</b>						
<b>Self-Sponsored</b>						
<b>Digital Writing</b>						

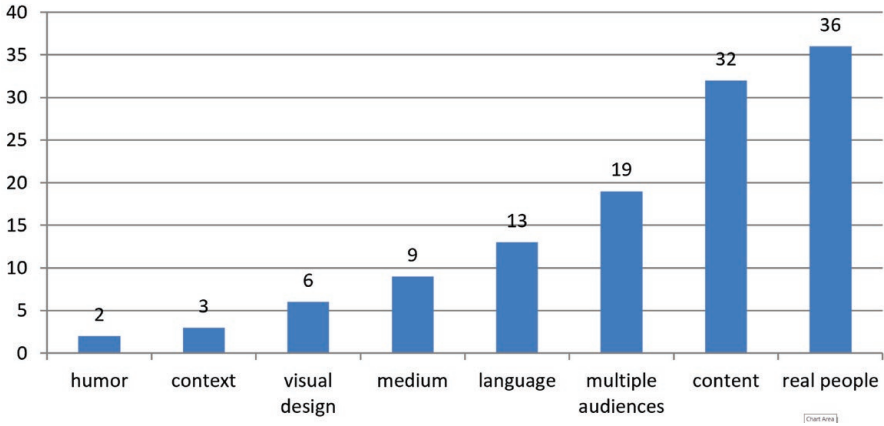
were not repeated. Any given excerpt could be given more than one secondary code; for example, an excerpt coded as “self-sponsored digital writing: strong audience awareness” could be given multiple secondary codes such as selecting appropriate “language” and paying attention to “visual design” given a particular audience. After initial coding, each interview was reviewed to increase consistency. Using Dedoose software, I coded the interviews with the following primary categories, as represented in Table 9.2.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RHETORICAL AUDIENCE AWARENESS

Participants showed a broad range of rhetorical audience awareness when discussing the decisions they made when composing their digital self-sponsored pieces of writing, as shown in Figure 9.1. The most common decisions participants mentioned were how they selected details and ideas to include and exclude based on audience needs (32 instances) and how they made certain decisions because they were writing for *real* people and not simply the default and generic audience of an instructor (36 instances). One student gave a response that was voiced by several others as well when she explained that “I think a lot about commenting on my grandma’s pictures. My grandma and her friends think about the purpose of [Facebook] very differently than me. I know her friends will see the comments!”

Participants showed an even more sophisticated awareness of audience complexity when discussing the need to modulate their content further if multiple audiences would be reading their writing (19 instances). For example, one participant said that “I’m aware that I am not only a friend, but a daughter, a big sister to different people.” The use of humor (2 instances), how context affected their writing (3 instances), visual design choices (6 instances), their choice of medium (9 instances), and their choice of language (13 instances) were mentioned less frequently but still show the wide range of issues participants adjusted according to their audiences.



*Figure 9.1. Rhetorical audience awareness in digital self-sponsored writing: 120 instances.*

While attention to humor and context totaled only five instances together, they were particularly interesting because of the level of complexity. One student explained that she decides whether and when to use humor/sarcasm in a text depending on the personality of the person she is speaking with and the content of their conversation: “I guess I usually know if a person’s receptive to it. Because I have certain friends who are very sarcastic and certain ones who don’t deal with it well. I guess, who I’m speaking to matters. And then, if we’re having a serious conversation, I’m not going to like jump into sarcasm halfway through. So the tone of the conversation so far, and where we’re going with that.” Another student showed careful attention to the broader context in her texts, noting that it is important to not inadvertently offend someone with a rude text. She therefore takes a more polite and personal approach with someone she knows less well:

If they’re not friendly when they’re texting I’m like “Wait, what’s wrong? Are they mad at me?” . . . I mean, if people are short in their text messages, sometimes there can be that, you know, insinuation that something’s wrong. So I’m always like “Hi, how are you? Is there any way that you could blah blah blah blah blah?” . . . that’s how I am as a person but also I just think it’s more effective in speaking to someone. It’s more polite. Texting is so . . . it can be done so thoughtlessly, I try to keep like a very personal touch when I’m texting somebody for a specific reason, but then again if it’s somebody who I’m

always communicating with . . . like my boyfriend or my best friends from home, then it's more like, light-hearted.

Participants produced fewer instances of audience awareness when talking about their academic writing, in terms of both the number and variety of references they made to this consideration (see Figure 9.2). They mentioned how they took their audience into account when making decisions about grammar and spelling (1 instance), achieving a goal (1 instance), responding to audience feedback (2 instances), and determining how to help a real person or group of people when working on a client project (7 instances). In a pattern that also occurs in regard to writing purpose, it is telling that the highest number of responses was in regard to writing for a real audience. Students were particularly interested in discussing how they made different decisions about content or style based on the needs or expectations of real audiences, as shown in this example of a student talking about content she wrote for a travel writing website:

I took into consideration that most people probably didn't read that book [she was basing an entry on]. . . . [the movie] wasn't in line really with the book . . . so I had to keep that in mind too. So what people assumed it was about wasn't necessarily what she wrote it about. So I had to . . . explain what she wrote about while also . . . balancing my own experiences. I didn't want to talk too much about myself or too much about the book, but I wanted to balance comparison but also expression of . . . what she wrote about versus what I wrote about.

Collectively these rich excerpts, which show students struggling and explaining writing choices they made for real audiences with different needs and expectations, suggest that students gain more experience making rhetorical writing decisions based on audience awareness when they are actually writing for real audiences.

In regard to their academic writing, students more often talked about decisions they made, based on their audience, in comparatively unrhetoical ways (see Figure 9.2). For example, they mentioned "giving my professor what he or she wanted" (2 instances), repeating what their professor had said word-for-word (2 instances), writing to make their professor happy (7 instances), or a few other unrelated comments about superficial audience needs (3 instances). Comments such as "I tried to do everything that she asked for on the assignment sheet" are not examples of students making rhetorical writing decisions. I categorized "giving my professor what he wanted" and repeating what their professor had so say word-for-word as evidence of less effective rhetorical awareness because such

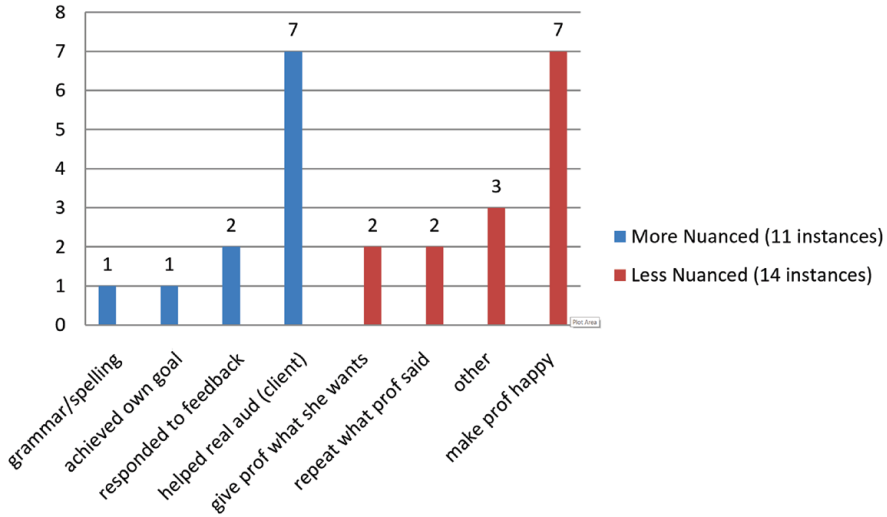
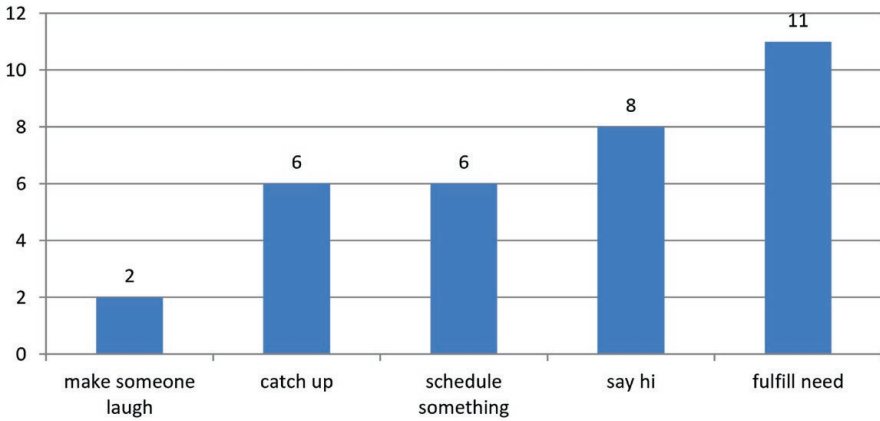


Figure 9.2. Rhetorical understanding of audience awareness in academic writing.

comments show that the goal of these decisions was to get a good grade, and wider considerations such as persuading their audience to believe something or moving them toward action were not part of the discussion.

The kinds of comments that were coded as superficial audience needs include “I knew it was going to get graded, so I had to double-check to ensure that my grammar and spelling were right, and that all of my sentences end correctly” and repeating a story the professor told in class so that he or she might be more receptive to the student’s writing. While attention to correct grammar and audience interests does show audience awareness and attention to ethos, I coded them as being less rhetorically effective because these choices were made with the goal of getting a good grade or getting the professor to like the student. Again, one might argue that these are rhetorical choices, but they are not the kinds of attention to audience needs on which teachers typically focus.

When students discussed their digital self-sponsored writing, they made significantly more references to writing for different audiences, as well as for multiple audiences; they discussed selecting the appropriate medium, content, and words; and they showed kairotic understanding when they discussed the importance of being aware of the timing of their writing. On the contrary, when students discussed their academic writing, they made far fewer references to making decisions based on their audience; and while they did take rhetorically impactful issues into consideration such as word choice or responding to audi-



*Figure 9.3. Rhetorical understanding of purpose in digital self-sponsored writing: 33 instances.*

ence feedback, they were very cynical about not having to take their audience into account because they were writing for their professors for a grade, as exemplified in this comment: “He likes for us to use his layout from class then add in, use his own sayings. . . . He liked it. I got a good grade.” The exception to this cynicism was when students were doing client projects and writing for real audiences; in these cases, students noted that they took their audiences’ needs into account because their writing was going to have an effect on real people.

## RHETORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF PURPOSE

During their interviews, participants generated a total of 33 instances of discussing different purposes for writing digital self-sponsored texts (see Figure 9.3). Participants’ reasons for writing self-sponsored texts ranged from very social/phatic purposes such as “to make someone laugh” (2 instances), “to catch up” (6 instances), and “to say hi” (8 instances), to more goal-focused purposes such as “to schedule something” (6 instances) and “to fulfill a need” (11 instances). This last and most common purpose, “to fulfill a need,” is exemplified by one participant’s comment that she texts because “I need something, a ride, an answer; [I] want to get something done.”

During their interviews, participants generated a total of 15 rhetorically informed instances of discussing different purposes for writing academic texts (see Figure 9.4). They said that their reasons for writing academic texts included “to develop thoughts” (1 instance), “to reflect” (1 response), “to prove you

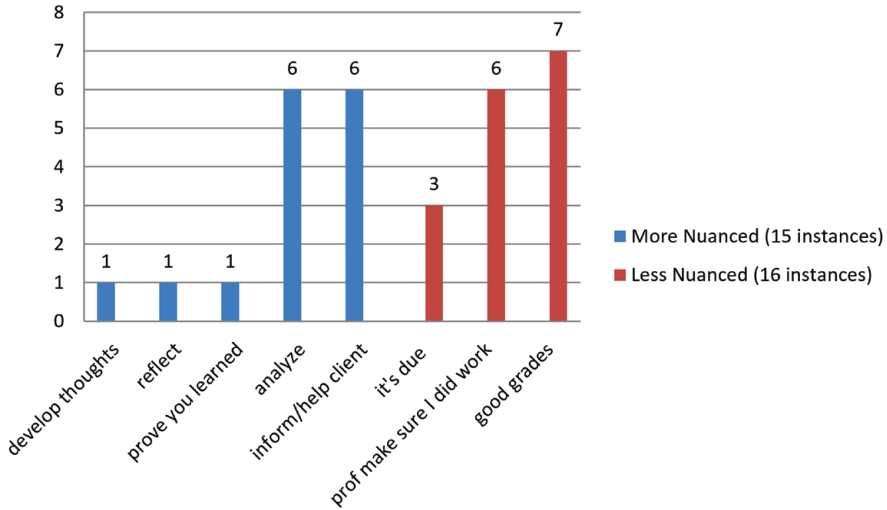


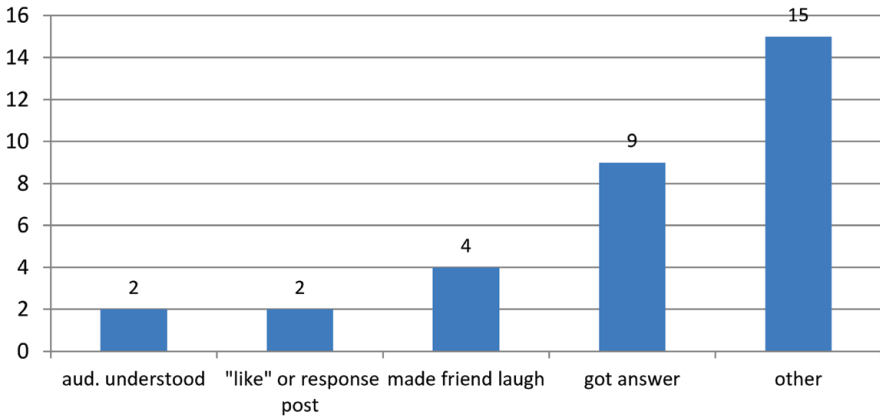
Figure 9.4. Rhetorical understanding of purpose in academic writing.

learned” (1 response), “to analyze” (6 responses), and “to inform/help client” (6 responses). Each of these purposes for writing academic texts are commonly taught in writing classes, and the last purpose, “to inform/help client,” is a common purpose in the case of client-based projects.

Interestingly, this is the question that produced the most responses for academic texts; in other words, the 15 responses that showed rhetorical understanding of purpose represent the highest number of responses that participants gave in regard to any question about academic texts. In addition, one of the reasons for writing—“to inform /help clients”—is in the context of writing for a real audience. This suggests that students understand that the stakes are higher when writing for real people with real informational needs, which in turn suggests that if we want students to experience and analyze writing purposes in rhetorically complex ways, then we need to create real writing contexts in our classrooms, with real audiences.

Participants produced an almost equal number of less rhetorically nuanced instances (16) for why they write academic texts (see Figure 9.4). Three students explained that they write an academic text because “it’s due,” six said because their professor wanted to “make sure I did the work,” and seven said because they wanted to get “good grades.” When asked to discuss the purpose of the particular piece of academic writing they brought in, seven students simply said some version of “for the grade. [If I] didn’t turn it in, then I wouldn’t get a grade” and “to get a good grade. It was asked of me in the class.”





*Figure 9.5. Rhetorical understanding of effectiveness in digital self-sponsored writing: 32 instances.*

Categorizing these responses as less rhetorically nuanced is problematic because on the one hand, they each do show some attention to the context and audience in question, insofar as completing a project by its due date and pleasing an audience with knowledge-gained shows attention to context and audience. On the other hand, such purposes for writing are less rhetorically complex and are inherently different than the kinds of nuanced rhetorical choices students discussed making for their self-sponsored digital writing, and they are not the kinds of purposes writing teachers typically strive to teach their students about.

## RHETORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EFFECTIVE WRITING

Participants showed a wide range of rhetorical ways to understand when their digital self-sponsored writing was effective (see Figure 9.5). Students explained that they knew this kind of writing was effective if their audience understood (2 instances), if they received a “like” or a response to a social media post (2 instances), if they made a friend laugh (4 instances), or if they got the answer they needed (9 instances), in addition to a variety of other singular but still rhetorical responses (15 responses). For example, students said they knew their self-sponsored writing was effective “if I get a lot of ‘likes’ on FB, I know it was good writing” or “if I get a response. If I get the answer I needed, I know I wrote effectively.” One student succinctly said that he knows his Facebook post is effective when he has “made someone laugh,” while a second student was attuned to how the effectiveness of a Facebook post could transfer from an online

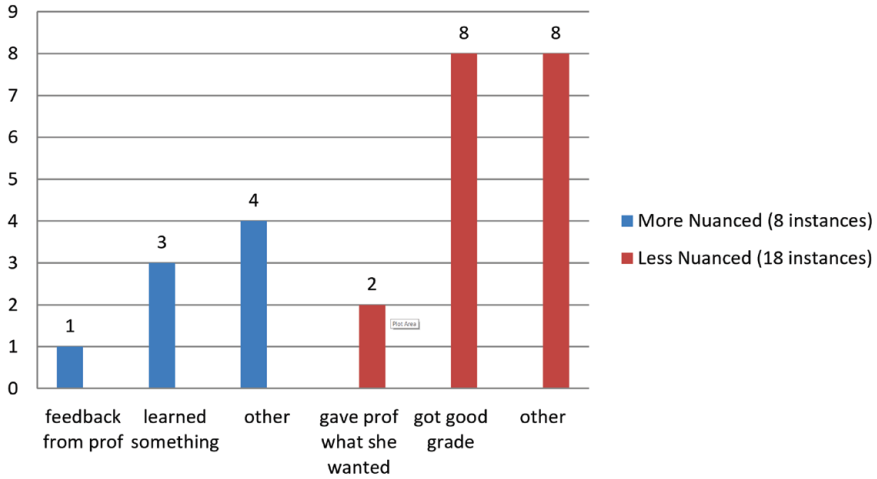


Figure 9.6. Rhetorical understanding of effectiveness in academic writing.

to a face-to-face context: “I guess since it’s [Facebook] usually used for humor, it’s, someone will laugh or have another funny response. Or maybe they’ll bring it up later. Sometimes that happens, when you actually see the friend in person, they’ll bring up, like, something you posted on their wall.”

Participants had far fewer rhetorical ways of explaining when their academic writing was effective (see Figure 9.6). Responses included that they knew their writing was effective if their professor told them it was effective (1 instance), if they learned something (3 instances), or if a student has managed to “[use] the right terminology” or “bring in . . . a certain critic or theorist” it will have made her writing more effective (1 of the 4 “other” coded instances). This last example reflects an understanding on the student’s part that using the language and theories of a particular discourse community can make writing stronger.

Participants produced even more instances of less nuanced rhetorical understanding of effectiveness of their academic texts, with a total of 18 instances (see Figure 9.6). Participant responses included giving the professor the content they believed he or she wanted (2 instances) and getting a good grade (8 instances). While the response that a piece of writing is effective if it gets a good grade is not completely without rhetorical awareness—in this context, good writing equals a high grade—for the purposes of this study, such a response lacks a deeper consideration of or understanding for what an audience might find persuasive. The even more blunt comment that “I was desperate to get an A, so I gave him [the teacher] his opinions” drives home the point that the student was focusing mostly on his teacher’s expectations as a way to earn a high grade.

**Table 9.3. Summary of participant responses**

	<b>Self-Sponsored Digital Writing</b>	<b>Academic Writing</b>
<b>Rhetorical Audience Awareness</b>	120 instances (use of humor, attention to context or visual design, etc.)	11 instances (grammar/spelling, responded to professor feedback, etc.)
<b>Rhetorical Understanding of Effective Writing</b>	32 instances (audience understood, got necessary answer, etc.)	8 instances (got good grade, learned something)
<b>Rhetorical Understanding of Purpose</b>	33 instances (made someone laugh, fulfilled need, etc.)	15 instances (developed thoughts, helped client)

Table 9.3 summarizes the total number of responses for each type of writing in each rhetorical category (audience awareness, effective writing, and purpose). Very broadly, the number of responses indicates that participants were more interested in talking about, and had more things they wanted to share about, their digital self-sponsored writing than their academic writing. This may have something to do with students not considering their self-sponsored digital writing to be actual writing. Several students were reluctant and surprised when they heard I was asking serious questions about this kind of writing. One student explained this when he said that “when I text, I don’t like . . . it’s not like I’m writing. Writing, for me, it’s like writing something down on a piece of paper or I’m typing. I don’t think of when I text, I don’t think of it as I’m writing. Which is, like, I know it is, but that’s not something that I really think about.” Lenhart et al.’s study reached a similar conclusion when they said that “even though teens are heavily embedded in a tech-rich world, they do not believe that communication over the internet or text messaging is writing” (2008, para. 6).

Another factor that may be at play here is students’ preference that their writing *do* something, or, as Lunsford (n.d.) says in “Our Semi-Literate Youth? Not so Fast,” they want their writing to have *agency*—and self-sponsored writing is more likely to achieve this. Perhaps students are more motivated to talk about their writing when they think it actually gets something done in the world. This study’s results about the effectiveness of writing supports this idea, since one way students said their self-sponsored digital writing was effective was if it helped them “get something done.”

## CONCLUSION

Although the sample size was small, several clear trends emerged from the participant responses:

- Participants did not initially transfer rhetorical knowledge or writing strategies between their self-sponsored and academic writing, confirming similar findings of previous studies (Lunsford, n.d.; Lenhart et al., 2008).
- Participants showed more rhetorical sensitivity (who to write, when, in what medium, how) in their self-sponsored writing than in their academic writing.
- Participants showed less rhetorical sensitivity in their academic writing, except in the case of client projects (a kind of project that asks students to write for real, often non-academic, audiences who have real needs that can be addressed through writing).
- Participants showed a keen awareness that self-sponsored digital writing is not valued by academia/wider public and that they should not value it either.

While participants did not automatically transfer rhetorical knowledge between their digital self-sponsored and academic writing, the potential for such transfer seems to exist, especially if students write for authentic purposes (as occurred with self-sponsored writing and in client projects). Arguing that client projects provide students with rich rhetorical situations in which to act and make decisions about their writing is not new. These results suggest that we cannot expect students to engage in sophisticated rhetorical decision-making when writing contexts are not authentic. Participants repeatedly referred to the fact that they were writing for an audience of “their professors” when writing academic texts, and therefore did not engage questions about audience, purpose, or effectiveness in complex or rhetorically rich ways. As the *Elon Statement* posits, potential for transfer also exists when students are encouraged to engage in metacognition (as occurred in the interviews). Learning through reflection is not a new idea. What I am proposing that is slightly different is that through reflection, students may learn to see that they are already writers through their digital self-sponsored writing, and that they have a storehouse of knowledge from this kind of writing that they often neglect to draw upon in academic writing contexts.

When participants were asked during the interview process to reflect on and compare and contrast their self-sponsored and academic writing, many of them commented that they had never considered the two types of writing in relation to one another and that they thought faculty would respond disparagingly to references to their digital self-sponsored writing. Every participant showed some level of surprise, and then chagrin, that they had just talked about their digital self-sponsored writing in some rhetorically-sophisticated ways, using terms and

criteria for making decisions which they had never considered using, or been asked to use, in their academic writing. It was at these moments that participants showed frustration with what they perceived to be academic snobbery—participants believed that far from openly referencing how or why they made writerly decisions in their self-sponsored writing while in academic contexts, they had to hide this part of their writing lives in the classroom. Some participants even expressed disbelief that I really wanted to hear about their self-sponsored digital writing, and several commented that the kinds of academic writing they were asked to do simply did not allow for any rhetorical decision-making at all. So while the potential for transfer from digital self-sponsored writing exists, participants do not believe their faculty members value this kind of writing and so they are careful to keep these writing experiences to themselves; in these cases, students aren't encouraged to reflect on and potentially transfer writing knowledge from one kind of writing to the other.

The results of this research suggest that, to encourage the potential transfer of rhetorical strategies between students' digital self-sponsored and academic writing, instructors could ask students to:

- Examine their rhetorical knowledge/strategies in non-academic writing domains;
- Consider the rhetorical knowledge/strategies they use in their own self-sponsored digital writing; and
- Reflect on these strategies, examine their value and effectiveness, and consider applying them in academic writing.

These suggestions are meant to invite students to bring the entirety of their writing lives and their writing experiences into the classroom for discussion and reflection; they encourage students to value, and imply that faculty also value, the writing that they do in internships, on-the-job, for themselves, and for their friends and family.

The kinds of activities faculty could design based on these suggestions could be short, informal and low-stakes; what is important is that these activities invite students to reflect on and engage in metacognition about the writerly decisions they make in their digital self-sponsored writing, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would transfer this knowledge to their academic writing as well. For example, students could be asked to use their cell phones to copy down 2–3 different text conversations, and then asked to reflect, in writing, on the rhetorical situation and the decisions they made when responding (the interview questions used in this study could be used for this purpose). After sharing their reflections in small groups, students could then be asked to discuss whether they had used in their academic writing any of the rhetorical choices or writing

strategies they had just mentioned in reference to their self-sponsored digital writing. Besides reminding students that they likely do a fair amount of writing in their day-to-day lives, this activity may encourage students to recognize that they likely consider rhetorical factors frequently in their self-sponsored writing, and that such factors should be considered in academic writing too. A second activity that could be used alone or in conjunction with the one just described is to ask students to alter one of the rhetorical features of a text message conversation (such as changing the audience from a friend to a grandmother, or the occasion from a celebration to a study session); in this activity students could reflect on whether or not their word, style, or content choices were appropriate for a specific audience or context.

As mentioned above, participants showed more rhetorical sensitivity to audiences in their digital self-sponsored writing, while paying hardly any attention to audience or context concerns in their academic writing. Reflection that shows participants how they attended to audience and context concerns in their self-sponsored writing might very well shock them into realizing that they too sometimes fail, like this study's participants, to engage in these rhetorical practices in their academic writing. I am not suggesting that faculty should assign students to write Facebook posts or force students to text each other for classwork; instead, short, low-stakes reflective activities like these are meant to invite students to bring rhetorical expertise they have honed while engaging in digital self-sponsored writing into their academic writing. Self-sponsored digital writing is not ruining students' academic writing ability; in fact, it might inform their rhetorical decision-making in productive ways. These are also considerations we might take into account when participating in discussions with colleagues or when making decisions about classroom policies banning cell phones or laptops in class, because such decisions send the message to students that the self-sponsored writing they do with these devices, and the rhetorical knowledge they've developed, is not valued in academia.

Given the small sample size of this study, future studies could benefit from more participants and from multiple and different kinds of institutions. Additional considerations for future studies include following participants longitudinally to determine whether active reflection between strategies used in digital self-sponsored and academic writing makes a difference; conducting faculty interviews as a way to complicate the data; and using students as co-researchers so that participants may be less self-conscious in their interview discussions.

The fact that participants were willing to and interested in talking about their digital self-sponsored writing at greater length suggests that we may be missing opportunities, as Yancey (1998, 2009) and Mueller (2009) have suggested, to tap into students' knowledge about writing that is formed outside of academic

settings, as well as students' potential identification of themselves as writers. Encouraging students to identify themselves as writers, with abilities to assess a writing context, audience, and purpose and respond accordingly, is a valuable part to becoming an effective writer. In addition to being a way to learn about what students bring to college already knowing about writing, and in addition to rethinking emerging writing processes and adjusting pedagogies accordingly, discussing students' self-sponsored digital writing is a way to access their identities as real writers.

Further, since participants engaged in savvier, more complex rhetorical decision-making when writing their digital self-sponsored texts, we may be neglecting to take advantage of opportunities to alter classroom pedagogies in ways that could greatly enhance the transfer of rhetorical knowledge and strategies between the digital self-sponsored and academic writing of students. For example, this research suggests that students would likely view the transfer of rhetorical strategies between digital self-sponsored writing and academic writing as a kind of far transfer; however, it is possible that by inviting classroom discussions about digital self-sponsored writing—by encouraging students to reflect on rhetorical decisions they make in their digital self-sponsored writing—students might come to view this part of their writing lives as a kind of rhetorically rich context in which they make writerly decisions, thereby changing it into a kind of near transfer context. Therefore, there is value in asking students to reflect on this part of their writing lives, the academically unsanctioned part, as they build their frameworks of rhetorical strategies for writing and construct their writerly identities.

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