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Perception and Performance of Communication Arts Students towards News Writing Courses in University of Uyo, Nigeria

Uduot Iwok

Lecturer, Department of Communication Arts,
University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

Oyokunyi Jon Ita

Lecturer, Department of Communication Arts,
University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

Elsie Edet Okon

Student, Department of Communication Arts,
University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract:

News writing Courses have always been a constant menu in the curricula of Communication Courses in most universities both locally and internationally. However, what is not clear and decisive is whether over the years the teaching method of News writing courses has reflected the increasing technological shift in journalism training. This study therefore attempts to look at the students' perception of the news writing courses, with a view to peep into their minds and dig out what is considered to be the challenges in performances of news writing courses among communication arts students of the University of Uyo. Using the theory of Social Learning as the theoretical framework of the study. The study adopted the survey method to obtain responses from sixty students from the department of Communication Arts through a questionnaire and interview method while data was analyzed using simple percentages. The study found out that even though the students admitted to the necessity of news writing courses as pertinent to their survival in the communication industry, that poor writing skills and poor teaching method accounts for poor performances in news writing courses. Secondly, that the curriculum of news writing courses should be reviewed to accommodate the innovation of present-day technologies especially with the fast pace of the information technology. The study recommends that the National Universities Commission (NUC) must review the writing courses curricula to reflect the present-day virtual realities and The "New Media" application in news writing courses. Also, that teachers of news writing courses should develop new and better template for teaching news writing that will involve the following: modeling and writing workshops to enable students perform better in their learning experiences.

Keywords: Perception, Performance, communication arts and news writing

1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges teachers have faced in the classroom has to do with teaching students how to write generally. Teachers have to take care of student's motivation, their level of writing and preferred way of learning before preparing any task. Samia Zerine (2007) asserts that the purpose of teaching writing as one of the four language skills is to facilitate student's learning and their daily communication. Many studies have been conducted in order to get more understanding about how to teach writing for young language learners.

From the inception of journalism training in most universities starting with the earliest of American Universities, the curriculum of studies has always emphasized news writing courses as part and parcel of the main training. Reporting is the cornerstone of journalism. Reporting is to journalism as research and evidence-gathering is to scholarship.

Writing has now become a huge part of every student's life, starting with the simplest content to the most complex writing pieces. At this point, students are asked to craft different types of essays, research papers and other kinds of creative writing tasks. The reason for this increase in variety of papers lies in the importance writing carries in students' lives during and after their education. Writing is a skill student will need for the future, which is why it is crucial to develop it to the proper level. This philosophy drives the teaching and learning for students in Communication Arts department of University of Uyo. In order to fully understand the import of our study, the curriculum of study in the Communication Arts department sees writing courses as forming the bedrock of any communication practice whether Journalism, Public relations, Advertising, Business and Organisation Communication or even public speaking.

As part of the training for journalism practice in the department of Communication Arts, the students are expected to undergo learning and assessment by way of continuous assessment and examination in a total of nine news writing courses namely:

- Com 122 - Writing for the Mass Media
- Com 211 – News Writing and Reporting
- Com 214 – Feature writing
- Com 221 – Critical and Review Writing
- Com 330 – Television programme writing and production
- Com 331- Science and Technology
- Com 323 – Business and financial Reporting
- Com 326 – Editorial Writing
- Com 415 Environmental Reporting

Writing is part of literacy. For this research study, literacy is viewed as under the umbrella theory of psychological processes and writing is both a cognitive and physical function. According to Kucer (2006), writing is not a “monolithic process” but rather a “trans active and recursive” process in which “various factors” (p. 201) impact its production. Kucer (2006), by citing knowledge and context as two of these factors, implies that writing is a psychological as well as a socio cultural process. This research study is consistent with Kucer’s double theoretical stance towards writing; this study examines students’ perceptions towards news writing Courses in the department of Communication Arts and students’ psychological response to writing in a situational context. Although perceptions are “formed in a series of cognitive steps” (Johnson, 1987, p. 208), the “situation or environment in which a piece of writing evolves [also] has direct impact on the . . . text that is ultimately written” (Kucer, 2006, p. 204). That is, writing is dependent on both the writers’ cognitive processes and the writers’ situational context (or purposes for writing).

1.1. Profile of News Writing Courses

The concept of news writing courses are courses covering all the basic elements of news and feature writing from ideas to producing gripping copy to deadlines, and even extends to the specialized reporting of science, environment and even health. Writing for the mass media is not intensive but extensive because it requires that the writer must be fully abreast of the subject matter to a point he or she can satisfactorily educate, inform or even entertain its readers. Students come into writing courses with many preconceive notions, attitudes and fears., Some students come into writing classes with some pretty deeply ingrained attitude about writing. Students who are at least likely to embrace the work they do and who are consequently getting less out of the writing class experience, are students likely going to dislike writing, fear it, or not understand it. These students may have had minimal writing experiences in their own lives and have had unpleasant often error oriented writing instruction through elementary and secondary school.

Writing is personal, emotional and visceral. To dig into one own mind and pull up memories, values experiences and ideas and put them out there is a very brave and sometimes frightening act, even for experienced writers, inexperienced and unconfident writers may be more sensitive to this than experienced or exhibitionistic writers because their sense of vulnerability, of embarrassment, of fear of failure or rejection may be much higher. Generally, the performance of communication arts students towards news writing courses is very poor.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Journalist writing was seen as the most challenging skill for a significant number of Communication Arts students who were studying for a degree in Communication Arts degree as part of the requirements of the undergraduate programs. Even after successfully finishing the degree courses, a number of those students were found to fail to meet their university requirements in producing an appropriate piece of writing for the final year thesis, which is both linguistically and communicatively valued by academic departments across the University. Many of those students came to the journalist program with different levels of language proficiency, different learning styles, different assumptions about writing and different views about the journalism training. Therefore, it was extremely important to understand what the students were bringing with them to the program in order to be able to respond appropriately to such demands when structuring and executing the program. Hence, the main objective of the present study was to investigate students’ perceptions of news writing courses and their performances and to evaluate their learning styles, and attitudinal disposition to the teachers who handle these courses.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were:

- Examine students’ attitudinal disposition to news writing courses in communication arts department.
- Determine factors that affect students’ performances in news writing courses in communication arts department.
- Evaluate student’s perception of the teaching methods and contents of the news writing courses in communication arts department.

1.4. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- What are students attitudinal disposition towards news writing courses in communication arts department.
- What factors affect students’ performances in news writing courses in communication arts department.
- What is student’s perception of the teaching methods and contents of the news writing courses in communication arts department?

2. Literature Review

Much research has been conducted on the writing and composition processes that student writers carry out. Researchers have come up with appealing and useful methods to improve student writing (Daly, 1978; McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer, 1985; Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Pajares and Johnson, 1993; Shell, Colvin, and Bruning, 1995; Shell, Murphy, and Bruning, 1989). However, regardless of the great amount of research and the initiatives to help students in their writing activities. It is not unusual to see students who register to study journalism and communication courses in universities in Nigeria struggle with their grades in news writing courses.

Celce-Murcia, (1991) asserts that expressing one's ideas in written form accurately and coherently in news writing courses is a major accomplishment the complexity of writing as a task tends to heighten anxiety levels in the students taking the writing courses. This anxiety can often demotivate the student or lead to discouragement and, thus, may result in negative attitudes towards writing. Sharples, (1993), while speaking of the challenges pointed to a study conducted at Cukurova University in Adana, Turkey (Yavuz and Genc, 1998) implied that despite the methods used, students showed signs of feeling intimidated when faced with the task of writing a text.

The majority of the students involve in the news writing courses at all levels consider news writing as one of the most complex skills to master. This may imply that students are tremendously hesitant and do not have self-efficacy in writing. Daly and Miller, (1975) introduced the term 'writing apprehension' which he said describes "the tendency of a person to avoid the process of writing'-particularly when the work is to be graded in some way",

Another study conducted by Daly (1978) investigated the differences between undergraduate students with low- and high-level writing apprehension. The results implied that students with high levels of writing apprehension consider news writing to be unproductive, and that, if possible, these individuals will avoid classes that involve writing assignments. When students are exposed to writing in class, they may reduce writing apprehension, and increase self-efficacy in writing.

Onwuegbuzie (1999) and Pajares & Johnson (1993) claim that writing apprehension has a negative influence on self-efficacy. Similarly, Pajares and Valiante's (1996) claim that students' self-efficacy beliefs about writing competence anticipated their writing performance thus affecting the students' writing apprehension in their mother tongue. Pajares & Valiante (1997) concluded that students with high self-efficacy in writing had low levels of writing apprehension.

McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer (1985) also came to the conclusion that self-efficacy and writing anxiety were interrelated, through studying essay scores of undergraduate college students. Also, Shell, Murphy & Bruning (1989) examined the writing self-efficacy of undergraduates and found out that there was a considerable connection between students' confidence regarding their writing skills and their general scores on a 20 -minute essay.

Well-developed writing skills are highly demanded in the workplace. Unfortunately, despite the apparent significance of such skills in the workplace, students are not prepared to meet the crucial challenges ahead. They are not prepared adequately in schools to write professionally. Consequently, writing has become a neglected life skill (Harder, 2006).

As an element of communicative language learning, languages are usually learnt in a spoken rather than written form. Consequently, listening and speaking are positioned before reading and writing on most language classrooms. The fundamental conception of the communicative approach to language teaching was that speech was the central priority of language learning, not writing. In other words, writing skills have not been emphasized in terms of communicative language skills and, thus, there is no agreement on the manner for teaching writing.

Conversely, it is believed that writing is important when compared with other academic skills. In the academic sphere, in the workplace, and in the society, writing is the medium through which one's work, learning and intellect is judged. The act of writing necessitates that the author be capable of clarifying a complex point to readers and to themselves. Writing entails that you, the author, foresee your readers' needs. In doing so, you will show your academic flexibility and development. Writing is also a crucial career skill. On the one hand, it is one of the most significant ways to efficiency. On the other hand, it is one of the most overlooked skills in the business world. Regardless of the nature of one's job or profession, the employees depict the employer and the institution itself. It is commonsense that good communication skills are fundamental for any organization and any employer should pay attention to the writing skills of future employees. It is suggested that job applicants should go through writing skills evaluation process parallel with other qualifications.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on a theoretical framework of Social Learning Theory. Social learning theory was developed in the 1970s by psychologist Albert Bandura, and it added a whole new dimension in understanding human behavior and its influences. Before social learning theory, psychologists believed human behavior was strictly a product of conditioning, or direct reinforcement. However, Bandura theorized that much of learning is a simpler and subtler process; humans can, and do, mimic observed behavior with little or no reinforcement. The theory was the first to incorporate aspects of both behaviorist and cognitive learning theories. For years, researchers studied a person's environment as the sole cause of his or her behavior. Through a process called reciprocal causation, however, Bandura proposed that human behavior results from the combination and interaction of three variables: the environment, the person's own thoughts and feelings, and the behavior itself. Reciprocal causation explains how people from similar environments can adopt completely different behaviors. The following concepts are also vital to the theory:

- Modeling – People can learn by observing the behaviors of others and their consequences.
- Learning without performance – Learning can occur without a behavioral change.
- Attention – Learning depends upon the subject focusing on the behavior being demonstrated.
- Expectation – People come to expect certain behaviors to be either rewarded or punished.

- Awareness – People must be aware that behaviors are being positively or negatively reinforced.

In looking at this theory in understanding the subject matter of news writing in the curricula of journalism training. Schools must not only teach news writing courses in classroom but must model it through simulation of news room environment. Secondly, they must be exposed to beats on a permanent basis so they can generate news stories ideas.

Learning occurs when an individual observes a model. Instead, reinforcement determines the extent to which a person exhibits a learned behavior. For example, a person who had watched an alcoholic family member die of cirrhosis would be more likely to restrict his alcohol consumption than someone who had witnessed no negative effects of alcoholism. However, social learning theorists acknowledge that people's expectations of reinforcement determine the amount of attention they pay to models, which affects learning. Students who know they won't be tested on a particular subject, for instance, are unlikely listen to a lecture on it. In this case students must constantly model writing through achieving a minimum of news writing assignment as part of their learning experience.

2.2. Research Method

The research employed a survey method and had a structured Questionnaire and personal interviews as a method for data gathering. The population of the study comprised of all the two hundred level to four hundred level students who offer news writing courses in Communication Arts department. This student amounted to 563, however our sample size was made up of Sixty (60) Students with twenty each drawn from the three levels as indicated. Analysis of the respondents showed that out of the 60 students 48 representing (80%) were female while 12 representing (20%) were male students.

All the items in the questionnaire were grouped and put into four categories to meet the structural requirements of the research questions. The questionnaire was reviewed and referred by a number of university instructors. Later, it was piloted with ten students. The final version of the questionnaire was reviewed and structured in accordance with the referees' comments and the piloting results. Hence, the final draft of the survey included twelve questions of a five-point Likert scale descending from "5" as strongly agree to "1" as strongly disagree. An open-ended question was placed in a separate sheet to give participants chance to express their opinion freely regarding what they liked and disliked about news writing courses. Using Cronbach Alpha Formula, the reliability of the questionnaire was found to be 0.92. The personal interview technique included five questions intended to consolidate the data collected via the questionnaire. These questions were not rigid in nature but they were flexible and allowed the participants to think and express their own answers freely. They were also checked by a panel of instructors in the lecturers to find out if they were consistent with the data that was intended to be gathered via the questionnaire. Interview sessions were organized during class time and office hour time. Special interview sessions before the early morning classes were organized for some students who could not join the office hour sessions and for those who showed enthusiasm to attend more sessions. The sampling method employed was the purposive method, because every student from the two hundred to four hundred level regular students are considered qualify by reason of the fact that all news writing courses are compulsory to all students.

3. Findings

SN	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	53	88
2	No	7	12
	Total	60	100

Table 1: Showing Students Consideration of the Necessity of News Writing

The indication here is that the majority of the students see news writing courses as essential to their study irrespective of their career choices.

SN	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
1	Poor writing skills	21	35
2	Poor teaching method	18	30
3	Poor Learning environment	12	20
4	Lack of passion for news writing courses	9	15
5	Other factors	0	0
		60	100

Table 2 Showing Factors That Affect Students Performance in News Writing

Indication from Table 2 shows that students admit that poor writing skills and poor teaching method account for poor performances in news writing courses. Given that these courses are meant to improve writing skills, other factors must be taken into serious consideration.

SN	Responses	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
1	I general don't like news writing courses	9 (15%)	6 (10%)	9 (15%)	30 (50%)	6 (10%)	60 (100%)
2	I don't consider news writing courses as necessary	9 (15%)	3 (5%)	3 (5%)	30 (50%)	15 (25%)	60 (100%)

Table 3 Showing Feelings of Students about News Writing Courses

Table 3 shows that students are actually positively inclined towards news writing courses. In other words, 45 students representing 75% see the necessity of news writing courses. In terms of likeness only 25 % of students expressed dislike for news writing courses

SN	Responses	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
1	The teaching method does not allow me maximize my potentials in news writing courses	12 (20%)	6 (10%)	15 (25%)	24 (40%)	3 (5%)	60 (100%)
2	I think I would have performed better if the teaching methods are different	24 (40%)	21 (35%)	6 (10%)	6 (10%)	3 (5%)	60 (100%)

Table 4: Showing Students Perception about Teaching Methods on News Writing Courses

Table 4 shows that the students have a negative perception about teaching method on news writing courses. This negative perception of teaching method affecting performance is held by 45 students representing 75% of the respondents.

SN	Responses	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
1	The teaching Method is not my challenge but the contents of the news writing courses	3 (5%)	30 (50%)	15 (25%)	9 (15%)	3 (5%)	60 (100%)
2	My writing skills will improve if both teaching method and content is reviewed.	39 (65%)	18 (30%)	3 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	60 (100%)

Table 5: Showing Students Perception about Contents of News Writing Courses

Table 5 indicates a clear position and reflects that if the teaching methods and contents is properly maximized, it will affect their students' performances in their news writing courses. This opinion is held by 57 students representing a total of 95% of the respondents.

4. Discussion of Findings

4.1. Findings of the Study Are Hereby Discussed Using the Research Questions as Guide

4.1.1. Research Question 1: What Are Students' Attitudinal Disposition towards News Writing Courses in Communication Arts Department

Findings from table 3 shows that students are actually positively inclined towards news writing courses. Invariably, 45 students representing 75% see the necessity of news writing courses. In terms of likeness only 25 % of students expressed dislike for news writing courses. Indication from table 1 shows that the majority of the students see news writing courses as essential to their study irrespective of their career choices.,

4.1.2. Research Question 2: What factors affect students' performances in news writing courses in communication arts department?

Indication from Table 2 shows that students admit that poor writing skills and poor teaching method account for poor performances in news writing courses. Given that these courses are meant to improve writing skills, other factors must be taken into serious consideration. A total of 39 students representing 55% of the respondents attributes their performance in news writing courses to poor writing skills and poor teaching method. Harder (2006) asserts that well-developed writing skills are highly demanded in the workplace. Unfortunately, despite the apparent significance of such skills in the workplace, students are not prepared to meet the crucial challenges ahead. They are not prepared adequately in schools to write professionally. Consequently, writing has become a neglected life skill.

4.1.3. Research Question 3: What Is Students' Perception of the Teaching Methods and Contents of the News Writing Courses in Communication Arts Department?

Table 5 indicates a clear position and reflects student's perception of the teaching methods and contents, that if properly maximized will affect students' performance in news writing positively. This opinion is held by 57 students representing a total of 95% of the respondents, thus implying that majority of the students feel that there is something wrong with the teaching methods and the contents of the news writing courses.

Villamin (2003) sees the Communication Arts teacher as the best facilitator of the learning process must possess the qualifications and the ability to communicate and teach effectively along his field of specialization. The teacher must be an effective communicator himself as such; he should be competent in handling the four modes of communication: reading, writing, listening and speaking. He must be well versed of the techniques and motivational strategies that will inspire students to become effective communicators as well. It becomes the responsibility therefore of the teacher to suit his methodology to the abilities and capability of the students so that teaching in the classroom maybe successful. He then uses varied teaching strategies to produce better learning outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that given the importance of news writing courses to communication arts students and since writing serves as the foundation for other communication skills it behooves on the management of the department to constantly review the teaching methods and the content of the curricula of news writing courses to reflect present day realities. There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size was relatively small as this study was targeted at developing a contextualized approach for evaluating the perception of the teaching and content of news writing courses in communication arts department. at the target university. Secondly, whether the results of this study can be generalized to students in other universities offering news writing courses is still subject to another debate however this study can lead to a more elaborate study that can provide a basis for generalization

6. Recommendations

This study recommends that as part of efforts to improve students' writing skills the following will be advisable:

- The National Universities Commission (NUC) must review the writing courses curricula to reflect the present-day virtual realities and new media application in news writing courses.
- Let teachers of news writing courses develop new and better template for teaching that will involve the following: Using examples of good student writing to discuss with other students what makes these pieces of writing effective. This helps students identify the elements of good work for particular assignments within particular disciplinary domains that, in turn, helps them become conscious of these elements in their own work.
- Teacher should model their process of writing by sharing with students their process in approaching writing tasks. For example, you can tell students: your own writing tonic.

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