

## The Value of Rewriting in Graduate Educator Preparatory Programs

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The United States is poised to infuse writing into the K-16 curriculum. The Common Core State Standards have been adopted by 46 states and the English Language Arts and Literacy Standards set benchmarks for literacy in history/social studies, the sciences, and technical coursework (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). The purpose of this retrospective, exploratory study is to understand the motivation of a random sample of 50 graduate students enrolled in educator preparatory programs at our state university with regard to why these students chose to rewrite an assignment. More specifically, the research question is: What motivates graduate students enrolled in educational licensure programs to rewrite an assignment and how do such students perceive the input of instructor feedback on their written work? Data were collected via a voluntary, anonymous, student questionnaire. Data analysis was thematic, using rereading to identify themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings suggest that integrating the teaching of writing into school licensure programs and providing focused, detailed instructor feedback is helpful to guiding students to revise and improve their writing.

“We cannot build a nation of educated people who can communicate effectively without teachers and administrators who value, understand, and practice writing themselves” (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006, p. 60). Accrediting agencies nationwide are suggesting that colleges of education include communications skills in their courses for aspiring educators. At our National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accredited institution, we have initiated a new course for accelerated post baccalaureate students seeking initial Massachusetts teacher licensure. The new course includes a focus on communication with parents, administrators and colleagues. Additionally, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is revising principal licensure standards to reflect communication skills for school leaders (see DESE website). As reflected in advertisements for educators, oral and written communication skills are an integral part of the qualifications for teaching and for school leadership positions.

Researchers of graduate writing have been building a rationale for why students should develop a facility with writing and have highlighted the benefits of doing so (Mullen, 2005; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Stevenson, 2006; Thomas, 2005). Apart from this exploratory study, “little has been studied about the writing skills of graduate students pursuing teacher education programs leading to certification” (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007a, p. 51). Additionally, little formal academic research has specifically looked at how graduate educator licensure candidates feel about rewriting their assignments and what impact that has on their writing skills.

At this writing, our nation is poised to infuse writing into the K-16 curriculum. The Common Core State Standards have been adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia, and the English Language Arts and Literacy Standards set benchmarks for literacy in

history/social studies, the sciences, and technical coursework (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). The increased focus on reading and writing is no longer the sole burden of English and writing teachers, but the responsibility of all teachers across grade levels and subjects (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010). The Common Core State Standards, among other skill sets, expects students to “adapt their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose and discipline” (2010, p. 7). For schools to meet this responsibility, administrators and teachers of all disciplines and grade levels should be adept in literacy and content. No longer can a teacher see a struggling student writer and say, “That’s not my job.”

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand the motivation of a random sample of 50 graduate students enrolled in educator preparatory programs at our state university with regard to why these students chose to rewrite an assignment. More specifically, the research question is: What motivates graduate students enrolled in educational licensure programs to rewrite an assignment and how do such students perceive the input of instructor feedback on their written work?

### **Writing in Graduate Programs in Education**

The high numbers of graduate students of education seeking advanced degrees, licensure and college credits force many colleges to put an emphasis on access. Education departments often generate revenue for colleges and universities, and the focus for educational programs is enrollment, not the quality of the program itself. Research into educator/administrator preparatory programs is a low priority for colleges and universities (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000).

Consequently, there are few studies of graduate writing programs and student outcomes, especially in

educational licensure programs. This, however, does not mean there are no literacy strategies for instructors to pursue. Recent research has indicated that there is a gap between instructor expectations and what graduate students understand they are expected to do. Often, graduate students are seen as expert writers with the necessary knowledge and skill to handle the expectations of master's and doctoral programs (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011; Singleton-Jackson, Lumsden, & Newsom, 2009). This assertion is reinforced by the fact that most graduate programs neither offer nor require specific courses in writing (Norman & Spencer, 2005; Singleton-Jackson et al., 2009).

If there are any writing courses in graduate programs, they are often remedial or for English Language Learners (Sallee et al., 2011). The graduate students themselves assume this expectation. In fact, undergraduate students see themselves as expert writers as early as freshman year (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). The more students expect themselves to already have expert literary skills, the less likely they will accept feedback and advice on improving their writing (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). In a case study, Abbate-Vaughn (2007b) found that 77% of her graduate students in education rated themselves as good writers, but using a writing test adapted from Howard, Ifekwunigwe and Williams (2005), the researcher found only 15% as actually competent for graduate-level work. Of the students who rated themselves as competent writers, only 13% actually were (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007a). Students who initially rate themselves as competent writers may suffer from a lack of confidence if they receive negative feedback (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007b; Sommers, 1982). In education programs, students who identify themselves as good writers may be referring to non-academic writing, such as personal letters, journaling, or e-mail (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007b; Norman & Spencer, 2005).

Butler and Britt (2011) theorize that many students enter undergraduate and graduate studies unprepared for the type of academic writing their programs demand. Wright and Rosenberg (1993) found college students and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students have little significant difference in their ability to craft sentences or develop an essay topic from one sentence to the next. College students see academic writing as difficult, stressful, and joyless (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007b; Mullen, 2006; Sallee et al., 2011; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986). Even for graduate students, writing academic papers is often "seen as a task to be completed" (Sallee et al., 2011, p. 6).

A study conducted by Singleton-Jackson et al. (2009) indicates that 97% of graduate students' performance on the SAT II writing test was not significantly higher than the average high school senior. Graduate students seem to be novice writers and may need basic instruction (Mullen, 2006; Sommers &

Saltz, 2004). Often, however, undergraduate and graduate students feel they receive little instruction, mentoring, or training to adequately write academically (Mullen, 2005). There is evidence to suggest that students are not writing enough at any level of their education and arrive at each subsequent level unprepared (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006).

Graduate instructors need to include writing skills and structure them into their curricula if they are to fulfill the mission of preparing professionals for the education field. Instructors who assume their graduate students are already equipped with all the necessary skills may be setting unattainable goals for their classrooms (Haswell, 2008). They may also be expecting high quality writing, while the students see academic papers as mere work to be completed.

The solution to insufficient graduate literacy is to incorporate writing instruction into the discipline (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2009; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). Sallee et al. (2011) argue, "Just as [instructors] expect students to master the content of courses, they should also be expected to demonstrate proficiency at expressing their ideas in writing" (p. 2).

Certainly writing skills are essential to any graduate program and are in line with the idea of academia. The outcome of a liberal education, according to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2011), is a "strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills" (para. 1). Mullen (2005) adds that graduate programs in education have a responsibility to give their graduates transferable writing skills that they can use them professionally and academically.

### **Instructor Feedback and Student Revision**

The importance of feedback and revision at all levels of education has been well researched, though the majority of graduate students often complete only one draft of an academic paper for submission to an instructor (Sallee et al., 2011). Singleton-Jackson et al. (2009) found in a survey of graduate students that despite their lack of confidence in their academic writing skills, 88.5% of graduate students had received a grade of "A" on their last academic paper. White (1994) contended that graduate students only valued the grade because revision is rarely required or rewarded by instructors. Students who rated themselves as good writers most often cited past grades on writing assignments, not any particular talent for writing (Norman & Spencer, 2005).

One way to improve graduate writing is to place less emphasis on a letter grade and require multiple drafts of papers with intermittent deadlines (Bean, 2011; Sallee et al., 2011). This is especially crucial in

graduate education programs. Haswell (2008) noted that the most common strategy taught in graduate writing courses was revision, while content was less important. Haswell (2008) also noted that the most common form of writing in graduate education programs was journaling, which places less emphasis on analysis, research, and structure.

The prevalence of journaling in education courses may result from students' preference for this type of writing (Norman & Spencer, 2005). Students enrolled in programs in education, in particular, cited creative writing opportunities as more enjoyable and rewarding than academic (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Though Mullen (2006) argued for personal journaling to promote a student's identity as a writer, the journal assignment should have a clear structure and goal set by the instructor, and include feedback and the opportunity for revision. To meet the responsibility of promoting academic literacy and writing skills for future teachers and administrators, however, colleges and universities should include support for student writing throughout their programs (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007a).

Inexperienced and novice undergraduate writers often are taught to write in a linear fashion, from research to draft, followed by editing and submission (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Sommers, 1982). This model does not promote revision based on feedback, and students will only concentrate on editing (Sommers, 1982). Sommers (1982) found student revisions only focused on word and phrase choice, not ideas or structure. Students recognized lexical repetition, but not conceptually and rarely revised main ideas or structure. Experienced writers, however, revise not only on a sentence level, but re-write to discover and frame the meaning of their argument (Joyce, 1991; Sommers, 1982). Fitzgerald and Markham (1987) found experienced writers continuously revised a text at any point in the writing process. Experienced writers also spend considerably less time on punctuation and spelling during revision, while novice writers place more cognitive energy on these errors (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986). Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1999) showed that college students could improve their revision skills with successful modeling and positive feedback. Students at all levels improve their revision skills when taught practical skills (Wright & Rosenberg, 1993). Revision is not a linear task for experienced writers, who may go through several drafts and ultimately change their structure or perspective from early drafts to final submission (Joyce, 1991; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Sommers, 1982).

How are instructors to improve graduate student writing in graduate educational licensure programs? Mullen (2005) advocated for alternative forms of writing, including creative stories, journaling and group

products to give students options. Peer-to-peer feedback can be less stressful for students and include more praise, but is often not as direct and helpful to overall improvement as an instructor's comments (Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006). Students may need direct instruction on grammar, spelling, citations and the options for layout and design (Mullen, 2005; Sallee et al., 2011; Thomas, 2005). Students should also be exposed to different organizational options that will fit their own writing skills and strengths (Mullen, 2005; Thomas, 2005).

The most direct and influential method is targeted feedback on student writing, with an emphasis on multiple drafts and revision (Mullen, 2005; Sallee et al., 2011; Thomas, 2005). Thomas (2005) noted that student writing improves when the instructor's feedback requires specific and meaningful revision by the student writer. Instructors need to focus on literacy as much as content in their classes and their feedback ought to improve student writing as much as student thinking (White, 1994). Students will revise only on a sentence-level, according to Butler and Britt (2011), and make little improvement to their main theme, structure, or argument, without direct instruction on how to revise. Students can improve their writing and revision skills through modeling and feedback, regardless of low self-efficacy ratings of those skills (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999).

Feedback, however, must be specific to be productive. Comments that are excessive, too harsh, or only focus on grammar and spelling mistakes are counter-productive (Bean, 2011; Sommers, 1982; Thomas, 2005; White, 1994). Overloading a student's paper with vague comments, multiple marks, or seemingly arbitrary points will not prompt student revision (Bean, 2011; White, 1994). Unclear directions, excessive, non-specific commentary on papers, no expectations of revision and an emphasis on grades leads to insufficient work and a student focus not on writing well, but merely producing a product. Novice writers are more likely to misinterpret directions for assignments and reiteration of expectations often decreases the need for major revision (White, 1994).

Norman and Spencer (2005) found that graduate students' perceptions of their own writing abilities were most often formed by the positive or negative feedback they had received on prior papers. Comments that are perceived as undeservingly harsh or excessive can negatively affect a graduate student's self-confidence as a writer for years (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Student revision increases when professor feedback is concentrated on the author's perspective, structure, or overall message (Thomas, 2005; White, 1994). There is evidence that balancing criticism with praise for good writing is more likely to prompt revision (Bean, 2011; Cho et al., 2006). White (1994) argued that an

instructor's feedback on student work has only one goal: "The student needs to see what works and what does not work in a draft, so that revision can take place" (p. 103-104). If students find corrections for every spelling error or citation mistake, then they will over-emphasize those mistakes during revision and miss any feedback on the larger issues (Bean, 2011; Sommers, 1982; White, 1994).

Sommers (1982) has found that comments are most effective when helping students revise the structure or meaning of their entire papers and have little to note about spelling or punctuation. Comments must be meaningful to the student and the assignment in order to prompt revision (Sommers, 1982). Students take pride in their writing, and are often motivated when an instructor merely reads and offers constructive feedback (Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Sommers & Esposito, 2012). Student revision increases not with the quantity of feedback, but with the quality; too much feedback reduces the effort put into the next draft and diminishes the re-thinking aspect of revision (Bean, 2011; Sommers, 1982; Sommers & Esposito, 2012; Thomas, 2005; White, 1994). Mullen (2005) found that graduate students expressed gratitude for feedback if it was given before any grading or final deadlines.

### **Role of Writing for Teachers**

The literacy skills of teachers, both in their own practice and in instructing K-12 students, implicitly have an impact on student achievement (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007a). Teachers are expected to instruct their students with greater frequency in writing skills. The development of the Common Core State Standards and the increased focus on writing skills adds additional emphasis to this responsibility. However, few states require a writing component for pre-service teachers to acquire a license (Norman & Spencer, 2005). There is limited instruction in writing theory and pedagogy for pre-service teachers enrolled in graduate programs (Norman & Spencer, 2005). Anders et al. (2000) hold that classroom teachers do not master research-based practices in teaching literacy and are not successful literacy instructors.

Math teachers should be practicing mathematicians to engage their students and raise student outcomes, just as a French teacher should be fluent in French and a physics teacher a practicing scientist to best instruct a classroom full of novices. Thomas (2005) stated that literacy teachers "need to be practicing writers, who write with a purpose—preferably submitting work for publication" (p. 33). This published work can be a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, a piece of poetry for a school publication, or an article for a peer-reviewed article, as long as the teacher is actively engaged in the writing process outside of instruction (Thomas, 2005). If large numbers of the nations'

teachers lack sufficient writing skills themselves and a lack of confidence in their writing, then it likely has an impact on the literacy skills of the K-12 pupils (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007a).

### **Role of Writing for School Principals**

An effective administrator must possess strong writing skills to communicate his or her message to students, faculty and the community (Rammer, 2007). The role writing plays in school leadership may differ from classroom instruction, yet principals, superintendents and curriculum directors need to write to a wide variety of audiences in many different forms. Joyce (1991) contended that the majority of a principal's communication is carried out in writing and the means of this written communication have only grown in the past decade. The written material a principal is responsible for has traditionally included internal memos, letters and handbooks for faculty and students, contracts, and disciplinary documents (Harris, 2008). Principals and assistant principals are often challenged on disciplinary decisions by parents who feel their child has been treated unfairly, thereby increasing the importance of a well-written, clear student handbook (Harris, 2008).

In the last decade, there is an emphasis on the increased priority of non-print communication such as e-mail, school websites, and online newsletters (Porterfield & Carnes, 2008). Whatever the modality, written communications from a school principal is often the only and most direct source of information for many parents and residents (Guthrie & Reed, 1991; Kindred, Bagin, & Gallagher, 1984; Lipham & Hoeh, 1974). Such communication is continuous as disseminating accurate, timely communication is crucial to principals developing trusting relationships with their teaching staffs (Gimbel, 2003).

For principals, written communication must reach audiences within the school and in the larger community, and it must be effective in delivering the administrator's message (Guthrie & Reed, 1991; Harris, 2008; Lipham & Hoeh, 1974). Principals are highly visible public servants and, as such, need to be well spoken and have solid writing skills which reflect that they have "the ability to communicate at a level that a specific audience will understand" (Kindred et al., 1984, p. 262).

When crafting written communication, the principal must take into account the expectations, interest and literacy of the audience (Guthrie & Reed, 1991; Joyce, 1991; Kindred et al., 1984; Porterfield et al., 2008). The principal must also take into account the organization of the information and allow for the targeted audience to comprehend the message (Guthrie & Reed, 1991; Kindred et al., 1984; Porterfield et al., 2008). The new

emphasis on electronic communications may cause misunderstanding, confusion, or offense because the messages are often short and involve less revision and editing (Harris, 2008). Therefore, in an electronic form, the school leader needs to write concisely and concretely (Porterfield & Carnes, 2008).

All of these communication-related expectations put an added burden on principals, who must now serve as public relation specialists and communication experts for their schools.

### **Role of Writing for Superintendents**

All of the above mentioned communication skills for principals are also relevant for school superintendents. In a review of extant literature, Rammer (2007) found that communication was cited in surveys as the most important administrative attribute by 99.3% of school superintendents. The American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association list the first two interview questions for prospective superintendents as (1) "How do you see the role of your position in developing community support for the schools?" and (2) "How would you contribute to keeping the community informed?" (Kindred et al., 1984, p. 1-2). These same researchers reviewed several surveys of American superintendents and noted that the superintendents chose communications and community relations as the two most valuable components of graduate coursework that they wished they had had in their graduate educator licensure programs (Kindred et al., 1984).

### **Summary**

Although there is a paucity of literature on the writing skills of graduate students enrolled in educator licensure programs, extant literature suggests that graduate students in general struggle with writing and rarely revise. Studies suggest that feedback can motivate revision, though it is more often lexical, not conceptual revision.

Instructors of higher education have recently expressed dismay at the literacy skills of undergraduate and graduate students. The Common Core State Standards are an attempt to address this deficiency directly, by emphasizing reading and writing throughout K-16 education. The development of the Common Core State Standards and the increased focus on writing skills adds additional emphasis to the responsibility of preparing aspiring educators with strong verbal and written communication skills.

### **Method**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand the motivation of a random sample of 50 graduate students

enrolled in educator preparatory programs at our state university with regard to why these students chose to rewrite an assignment. More specifically, the research question is "What motivates graduate students enrolled in educational licensure programs to rewrite an assignment and how do such students perceive the input of instructor feedback on their written work?"

### **Procedure**

A three-question feedback questionnaire was distributed electronically to all students in one instructor's accelerated post-baccalaureate (APB) initial teacher licensure classes and in that same instructor's graduate administrator licensure classes over a period of three years. As such, this study looks back at the data collected during that period of time. The questions emanated from the instructor's desire to obtain feedback from students as to why they did or did not revise their writing assignments when offered the opportunity. Here are the three questions:

1. Why (or why not) did you accept (or not accept) the opportunity to rewrite your assignment?
2. What were the most significant insights you gained from rewriting the assignment?
3. What impact, if any, did my comments have on your first submission?

Over the course of three years, data from the three question feedback questionnaires were collected. Data were collected via a voluntary, anonymous, student questionnaire. Data analysis was thematic, using rereading to identify themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Student responses were assessed for similar themes. Student responses were grouped under the same themes if they had similar reasoning or purpose; for example, all students that cited grades under question one were collected under one theme. All students that remarked on the clarity of feedback instructions were grouped under the same theme.

As themes emerged from each one of the three questions, they were tabulated under each one of the questions. For each question posed, students frequently offered more than one response to the question. Each response was collated under the specific theme, even if multiple themes originated from a single student. The themes were determined by student responses, not by the authors.

### **Sample**

Since all students in one instructor's graduate educator licensure courses received the brief

questionnaire, those who chose to respond comprised a random sample. These respondents turned out to be only those who chose to rewrite an assignment. Respondents were from two distinct graduate education programs; an APB, initial teacher licensure program and a graduate administrator licensure program. To preserve student anonymity and to avoid comparing, no demographic data was included.

### Data Analysis

The first question in the questionnaire was “Why (or why not) did you accept (or not accept) the opportunity to rewrite your assignment?” Of the 50 respondents who did rewrite an assignment, 29 (58%) stated they rewrote the paper because they were dissatisfied with their grade or wanted to improve their grade (see Table 1). This reason was given more than any other and indicates the importance that these graduate students attached to letter grades on their writing assignments. Here are some selected comments: “I chose to rewrite my assignment in hopes of improving my grade and also trying to improve my knowledge”; “It gave me a chance to correct syntax, and meaning. I wanted a better grade”; and “I needed to get a B or better in the class and I was disappointed in myself for producing sub-par work.”

Eighteen (36%) respondents reported they wished to produce a better product or paper. Though this reason may seem less superficial than a perception of a poor grade, taken together, a superior grade would indicate a superior product. Students who reported that they wanted to produce a better paper may now have understood the rationale for the grade and the instructor feedback on the original submission of the assignment. Here are two of their comments: “I didn’t think of my ‘fix-ups’ as rewrites, but I guess they technically are. I love to write and always like my writings to be good as possible so it just makes sense to fix things that aren’t right” and “I chose to accept the opportunity to rewrite some of my assignments because I felt that if my first effort did not meet a certain standard that it was

important for me to give myself the opportunity to improve.”

Twelve (24%) students reported that they wanted to demonstrate or enhance their knowledge of the content material with an improved, revised paper. These students identified the shortcomings of their initial drafts as errors in content, not in terms of literacy skill. These students realized they needed to deepen their understanding of the content surrounding the writing assignment. Twenty-four percent of student responses indicated that the revision process helped them learn to write more concisely and clearly—just not in the first submission. Good writing requires attention to process and opportunity to revise. Here are some of their explanations: “From rewriting the paper I was able to better understand theory” and “I learned a few new concepts by revising this assignment.”

Ten (20%) respondents indicated they had misunderstood or did not adequately follow the instructor’s directions. The chance to revise the paper allowed them an opportunity to produce a paper that fit the original expectations. Here are some of their thoughts: “I accepted the opportunity to fix this assignment because I made a very silly oversight in the directions!” and “I did choose to rewrite a paper as I misinterpreted the writing assignment.”

Four (8%) respondents reported they were disappointed in their own effort, citing time constraints and time management as the source of the initial product. Here is what two of them said: “I did not give my all in them or put my best work forward” and “But after I received the first one back I realized that the first submission was not my best effort and I didn’t want to start the semester off on the wrong foot.”

Four (8%) respondents reported a desire to follow up on the instructor’s feedback. Some of their comments were: “I accepted the opportunity to both try to increase my grade and also follow up on the suggestions” and “The comments that were made on the graded copy brought my attention to the areas that should be elaborated on.”

Table 1  
*Responses to Question 1: “Why (or Why Not) did You Accept (or Not Accept) the Opportunity to Rewrite Your Assignment?”*

Response	<i>n</i>
Improve grade	29
Produce a better product	18
Demonstrate knowledge/better oneself as a student	12
Missed instruction/wish to follow directions	10
Disappointed in own effort	4
Follow up on instructor comments	4

*Note.* *N* = 50. Students responded with more than one comment on this question.

The second of the three questions posed was: “What were the most significant insights you gained from rewriting the assignment?” Data from the second question regarding significant insights from rewriting the paper were more varied and diverse than those of the first question. There were 15 separate themes that emerged from the 50 respondents (see Table 2). One comment was, “To be more elaborative; I’m so used to answering the question point blank that often times I assume the individual is aware of what I’m talking about.”

Ten (20%) respondents reported that the directions or expectations of the original assignment were better understood, and they could then complete the assignment with proficiency.

Eight (16%) respondents claimed that they had gained a better understanding of the material through the revision process. This idea of learning through revision has been noted by Sommers (1982), Joyce (1991), and Scardamalia and Bereita (1986), yet was referenced by only 16% of the respondents. Responses from 12 students (20%) suggest they deepened their understanding of the concept they were writing about. Here are two responses corroborating this notion: “The most significant insight I gained from rewriting the assignment was gaining more knowledge on brain-based learning” and “Through two-three revisions, I was able to see what was meant by theory.”

Seven (14%) respondents claimed to have invested more time into the revision than the original draft, and five respondents reported putting more effort or passion into their writing. Five (10%) respondents gained insight into the importance of rereading or self-editing their writing before turning it in to an instructor. Five (10%) students also claimed to have learned the correct way to create APA citations. Here are two of those responses: “Having the opportunity to rewrite the paper gave me time to consider the assignment using different criteria and from a new perspective” and “I also learned the importance of attention to detail when citing in APA format.”

Other themes that emerged from student insights were a new perspective on their own writing (four), the importance of correct grammar and spelling (three), an improvement in their writing ability (two) and that they had left out key components of the original assignment (two). Additionally, two students claimed that they did not gain significant insights.

Student responses seemed most positive in the third question about instructor feedback: “What impact, if any, did my comments have on your original submission?” Thirty (60%) students reported that the feedback was specific and practical and allowed them to make real improvements in their revisions (see Table 3). Here are some selected responses: “Your comments were suggestions on how to edit. These had a practical

impact on the original submission” and “They offered clear direction so that I felt comfortable rewriting this assignment.”

Ten (20%) students said that the mere fact the instructor cared enough to read and offer feedback spurred them to action. Mullen (2005) noted this gratitude by graduate students towards instructor feedback. Paul Rogers (2010) said that an instructor’s written response to student writing is a contributing factor to the development of student writing. Here are some responses demonstrating this idea: “I enjoy reading your comments. For one thing, they show you actually read what I wrote and thought about it” and “The comments were very helpful and in all honesty made me feel better about writing them because I knew they were being read and taken seriously.”

Ten students (20%) claimed that they had a clearer idea of the directions and expectations of the assignment and could adequately produce the desired product. These self-assessments indicate that the students did not see their writing as the reason for their disappointing grade, but merely a misunderstanding of the instructor’s directions.

Three students (6%) reported being motivated by the instructor’s feedback and three others claimed the instructor’s feedback helped them grow as learners. Three students (6%) also indicated that receiving personal feedback by phone or in person after class was more helpful than text.

Other themes that emerged included an opportunity for students to clarify their own thinking about the subject matter (two). Other students indicated a new perspective in the assignment, new ideas about the content, and a better final product than the original draft (one each). Though revision is meant to strengthen a writer’s thinking as much as his/her writing (Joyce, 1991; Sommers, 1982), the respondents were more concerned with specific areas of their own drafts that could be improved, a phenomenon Sommers (1982) has observed. Few students claimed to have changed their perspective, thinking, or main ideas.

## Findings

The highest response for the reason students revised their assignments was to improve their grade (58%), as White (1994) emphasized was often a student’s focus. Though an unsatisfactory grade was the biggest impetus to revision, there is little research on the effects of grading on graduate writing. Singleton-Jackson et al. (2009) found that nearly 90% of graduate students in their study of graduate writing proficiency had received a grade of “A” on their last writing assignment, despite evidence that most were writing at a level comparable to a high school student. Mullen (2005) argued that feedback should occur before a

Table 2

*Responses to Question 2: "What Were the Most Significant Insights You Gained from Rewriting Your Assignment?"*

Response	<i>n</i>
Focus on clarity/structure	14
Follow directions/meet expectations	10
Better understood concept/material	8
Devote more time	7
To self-assess/self-edit	5
Devote more effort/passion	5
Correct citations	5
Gained new perspective on writing	4
Use correct grammar/spelling	3
Missed a component of paper	3
Use formal/academic language	2
No significant insight	2
Writing skills improved	2
Ask instructor for help when needed	1
Standards of self too high	1

*Note.* *N* = 50. Students responded with more than one comment on this question.

Table 3

*Responses to Question 2: "What Impact, if any, did My Comments Have on Your Original Submission?"*

Response	<i>n</i>
Specific focus on areas to improve	30
Pleased instructor cared enough to read/offer feedback	10
Right directions/Clear expectations	10
Motivated by instructor's effort	3
Personal growth as learner	3
Receiving feedback personally was most helpful	3
Clarify/rethink own work	2
Embarrassed	1
New perspective	1
Resulted in better product	1
Proofread/self-edit	1
New ideas	1
Honesty	1

*Note.* *N* = 50. Students responded with more than one comment on this question.

grade is given, though a lower grade may spur more effort and time in a revised work.

White (1994) also stressed the likelihood of students missing directions or misinterpreting the purpose of an assignment. Twenty percent of the responses for all three questions remarked upon missing directions or wishing to complete the assignment correctly. Sixty percent of students reported that the feedback was specific and practical, allowing them to make real improvements in their revisions (see Table 3). Here are two selected responses: "Your comments were suggestions on how to edit. They had a practical impact on the original submission" and "They offered clear direction so that I felt comfortable rewriting this assignment."

Ten (20%) of students said that the mere fact the instructor cared enough to read and offer feedback spurred them to action. Mullen (2005) noted this gratitude by graduate students towards instructor feedback. Here are some responses demonstrating this idea: "I enjoy reading your comments. For one thing, they show you actually read what I wrote and thought about it. I greatly appreciated your comments and your time" and "The comments were very helpful and, in all honesty, made me feel better about writing because I knew you were reading the assignments and taking them seriously."

Ten students (20%) claimed that they had a clearer idea of directions and expectations of the assignment. Several students mentioned the desire to produce a



better product (36%) and demonstrate their knowledge or mastery of the content (24%). This follows the literature that graduate students take pride in their writing and wish to be recognized for good writing (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007a; Mullen, 2005).

The insights that students reported from rewriting included an increased focus on the clarity or structure of the writing assignment (28%). Sommers (1982) found students often revised with this in mind, changing sentences or paragraphs instead of concepts or ideas. Only 16% of students found revision to improve their writing, though Sommers (1982) and Joyce (1991) cited revision as including ideas as much as language. Just one student felt revision had led to the development of new ideas. This result may point to the novice writing ability of the students themselves (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). Fourteen percent of responses noted the increased devotion of time to the second submission, matching the data that many graduate students find writing as merely a task to be completed (Sallee et al., 2011).

The responses for the third question, on the impact of instructor feedback, overwhelmingly centered on the specific areas needed for improvement. A noteworthy finding, reinforced in the literature (Sommers, 1982; Sommers & Esposito, 2012; Thomas, 2005; White, 1994) is that 60% of this study's respondents felt that the instructor's precise feedback helped them specifically to improve their writing. White (1994) argued that this is the main purpose of feedback; to improve student writing. This direct focus in feedback is most effective in improving the quality of student revision (Sommers, 1982, Sommers & Esposito, 2012; Thomas, 2005; White, 1994).

Twenty percent of students were pleased that the instructor took the time to offer feedback and an opportunity to revise and 6% explicitly reported to be motivated to improve by the instructor's efforts, behaviors that have been noted by other researchers (Mullen, 2005; Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Sommers & Esposito, 2012).

Questionnaire responses from this small study suggest that graduate students enrolled in educator licensure programs rarely revise their assignments and are mainly motivated to do so to improve their grades. Although instructor feedback can motivate such students to revise their writing assignments, such feedback needs to include a conceptual as well as a lexical basis. Instructors' feedback often provides only the latter in their comments.

### Limitations

Since the questionnaire's purpose was to elicit feedback on rewriting assignments in graduate educator licensure programs, no demographic data was included

in the feedback questionnaire about age, gender, ethnicity or socio economic status of the sample population. This retrospective, exploratory study was conducted in one public university in New England and cannot be generalized. The sample was composed of self-selected respondents.

### Discussion and Implications for Practice

These data suggest some implications for educator preparatory programs. Student respondents from this study indicated that they gained insight from rewriting their assignments. Instructors should consider offering such opportunities to their students. Findings also suggest that students appreciate feedback demonstrating that the instructor read their work. According to our respondents, feedback which specifically points out how to revise assignments motivates students to rewrite. Knowledge gained from rewriting is often lexical, but some students find it helps them conceptualize and better comprehend the assignment.

Data also point to the importance of delivering clear instructions and delineating expectations. Perhaps a peer review of the expectations of the writing assignment would be helpful. Some instructors suggest a quick paper and pencil quiz on the directions/expectations of a specific writing assignment. The quiz would be used formatively, to assess student understanding of the expectations of the assignment.

Another consideration for future directions might be to assess artifacts that graduate educator applicants might be required to provide for consideration to graduate admissions departments, such as on-site written responses to writing prompts rather than prepared essays. This may help guide instruction for those who are selected for matriculation into graduate educator programs.

Results of this study will change my practice. I will be more deliberate in delivering instructions and in asking students to clarify their understanding of the assignments. I will also offer a broader array of writing assignments. As suggested by Singleton-Jackson et al. (2009) and Wingate et al. (2011), I will incorporate writing instruction into my courses. Since data from this study suggests that thoughtful comments create the motive for revising, I will continue to offer specific, focused feedback to students and consider a first draft submission without a grade.

With the advent of the Common Core State Standards, there is a focus on K-16 writing. It is incumbent upon prospective and current educators to write well. Educator preparatory programs need to include opportunities for faculty members to develop skills in how to augment the writing skills of their students.

Higher education instructors need to know how to offer feedback on student writing and how to help

students improve their communication skills. If an institution has a Writing Across the Curriculum program (WAC), such as our university does, a session on how to provide meaningful feedback to students so they can improve their writing skills may be helpful to instructors. Also, a WAC website could offer resources on providing feedback to students in their writing. As part of the WAC Program, graduate students could be selected and trained as peer coaches to offer writing tutorials to other graduate students who wish to improve their writing skills.

Graduate teacher and school leader educators might consider including different forms of writing that teachers and school administrators need—curriculum development, grant writing, written communication with parents, local community leaders, and other educators via email or other types of correspondence.

Integrating writing skills into graduate educator preparatory programs and offering constructive feedback to graduate students enrolled in educator preparatory programs is integral to building a workforce of educators who display effective writing and verbal communication skills. Helping new and aspiring educators with their writing skills will pave the way for them to pass this knowledge onto their own students.

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