THE GENERALIST'S CORNER

Promoting Writing Among Psychology Students and Faculty: An Interview With Dana S. Dunn

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Perilou Goddard is a professor of psychology at Northern Kentucky University (NKU), where she teaches introductory and abnormal psychology as well as courses in writing in psychology and drug policy. She was chosen as NKU's outstanding professor in 1999.

Dana S. Dunn is a professor of psychology and former chair of the Department of Psychology at Moravian College, where he has taught since earning his PhD in 1987. A Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Dana is the author of 2 textbooks and many journal articles, including 9 in Teaching of Psychology. *He is currently working on* A Short Guide to Writing about Psychology *to be published by Longman in 2003.*

Goddard: You're a prolific writer. What got you so interested in writing?

Dunn: Several things piqued my interest. I love to read good writing and always want to emulate what I read. And, to be a good academic psychologist, you need to write.

Goddard: Did you have writing mentors?

Dunn: I've had several. My wife is a freelance editor who works in publishing. We met when I was a graduate student. I am embarrassed to admit that she knew my dissertation almost as well as I did, having read it and critiqued its prose so many times. She honed in on some of my bad writing habits and nicely set me straight. Sarah doesn't read my work as much as she used to—she's too busy—but her influence is always there. Another writing mentor was my academic mentor in grad school, Timothy D. Wilson (University of Virginia). He's a stickler for detail and a very planful writer—I learned to draft, revise, and redraft manuscripts while working with him on various social psychology projects and papers.

Goddard: I had a similar experience. When my graduate school mentor, Dick McFall (Indiana University), returned the first draft of my dissertation proposal to me, it weighed more because of all the red ink! But he was just trying to move me up from where I was to the next level.

Dunn: Charles Brewer (former editor of *Teaching of Psychology* [*ToP*]) was also an enormous influence. I learned so much from the thoroughness of his reviews, particularly about condensing, being specific, and putting in examples. I maintain that Charles did a thankless job and an eternal kindness by allowing me to revise the early papers I sent him two or three times.

Goddard: My guess is that faculty think the benefits of learning to write well are obvious, but students may not see it our way. How can we persuade them to see learning to write well as beneficial? Why *should* they see it as beneficial?

Dunn: One reason for learning to write well is to gain self-understanding. When you write, you discover your own opinions and views. Students don't always realize what their opinions *are* until they put them on paper. Our students need to be told by us that their opinions matter, as long as those opinions have been rigorously thought through. Understanding that their opinions have value helps students connect with the wider picture of human behavior. So most of the time, putting thoughts on paper allows you to gain self-understanding. But students usually won't do this unless they have

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a cheerleader like us on the sidelines encouraging them to do it.

Goddard: I've certainly experienced that link between writing and understanding. In fact, I'm embarrassed to admit how many times I have only gotten a clear understanding of something *after* writing a lecture about it!

You mentioned your love of reading as one of the reasons you became interested in writing. But at the college level, reading and writing are rarely seen as complementary activities.

Dunn: Right. For instance, you get more out of writing if you can put it in context. Students should be given good examples of journal articles to read, but they also need faculty members to tell them what's good in the articles. Students come to appreciate some of the finer points of scientific writing when you help them do more than just unpack the facts.

Goddard: What else can be done to link reading and writing more explicitly?

Dunn: Students should read more *high quality* writing and such writing need not be in psychology. I find that my students don't read enough serious novels, plays, short stories, or essays unless they are assigned in class. Writers always read, and I fear reading is a lost art to many students, so I plug reading whenever I can (I routinely announce book titles they should read in my classes as well as tell them about what fiction or nonfiction works I am currently reading—just now it's a couple of novels by Philip Roth). If they want to improve their writing in some area of psychology, then they need to visit the key journal(s) in that area and see who the prolific writers are—a few articles later by the same author and they can have some sense about the quality and style of that psychologist's writing. The most prolific writers in the discipline are not necessarily the best writers, but I suspect there is a modest, positive correlation there somewhere. When students read the work of psychologists they admire, they need to look for cues to style, cues they can adopt or adapt in some way to their own work.

Goddard: So was it your awareness of these benefits to students that got you interested in focusing so much of your own teaching efforts on writing?

Dunn: As a professor at a liberal arts college, part of my responsibility is to teach students to express themselves on paper and orally. Also, I think it's an issue of professional credibility. Most of us were attracted to the profession because we love to teach, but when teaching undergrads, we focus too much on content. We're doing a disservice to the students if we don't teach them how to write better. It's our obligation to them, and of course it's necessary for the development of their own professional skills.

Goddard: What influence has the writing-across-the-curriculum movement had on your philosophy and practice of teaching?

Dunn: Writing across the curriculum has always been a concern at Moravian College and has had a big influence on my writing. During college-wide curriculum discussions, I learned a great deal about writing as a process, everything from freewriting to peer editing and reviewing of drafts. For several years, discussions at the College have focused on getting students to see writing as an essential skill to be refined with experience, not something to be forgotten once the freshmen year ends. Learning from our colleagues in English, many of us have included workshop components in our classes. Several years ago I taught a section of freshmen writing in our (then) interdisciplinary core curriculum. Several non-English faculty each took a section of the course—it was tough but I learned a great deal from my students and peer instructors. It's amazing how easy it is to recognize your own bad writing habits when you must teach others to break their ingrained habits. I took many of the lessons I learned during those 2 years and applied them in my psychology courses and in my writing.

Goddard: Although it's my impression that many psychology professors have increased the amount of writing they require students to do, it's also my impression that relatively few professors are willing to grade writing, other than to grade content and, perhaps, to assign some global writing quality grade. Reasons for the reluctance to grade writing range from "I don't know enough about grammar myself, so how can I grade writing?" to "That's why students are required to take composition courses. It's the job of the English faculty to teach writing. My job is to teach psychology." How do you counter such assertions? What do you think can be done to persuade more psychology faculty to teach students to write better?

Dunn: Your comments here are more than hauntingly familiar—I hear them on my own campus, even in my own department. There is a reason some colleagues would consider teaching writing to be thankless, as students don't realize how important honing writing skills is until long after the course is over (and perhaps the instructor is forgotten). (As an aside, I had a former student write an enthusiastic e-mail to me a few years back—she told me how much all the writing she did in my classes paid off in her career and graduate education. She even disclosed that she wrote more papers in any one of my classes than some of her grad school peers wrote during their entire undergraduate careers. I was very sad for them but heartened for my student, who said she hit the ground running, er, writing, with no trouble.) Anyway, I counter colleague assertions that "writing is too tough" or "that's for the English faculty" by reminding them that we are all supposed to be writers, and that with few exceptions, all of our disciplines see the publication of scholarship as the brass ring. I also remind them that we have a duty to our students. In fact, I've countered that if they don't want to teach students to write papers, the very least they could do is to emphasize in-class (or take-home) essay exams—at least, then, students will get some writing experience in their classes. To be honest, most of my college colleagues see teaching writing (or at least assigning it) as part of their jobs, and there is both subtle and not so subtle peer pressure to add meaningful writing assignments. Our new general education curriculum contains several writing intensive components and departments are required to step up to the plate to demonstrate what

writing exercises they are including. Many colleagues have used this requirement as an opportunity to think about increasing the writing in their classes.

Another reason is that, as professors, we want the writing to improve so we can spend more time focusing on the content of the papers and less time focusing on the mechanics. But you're not going to ever get to *do* that if you don't teach writing. It's sort of a survival skill.

Finally, I try to convince my psychology faculty colleagues (and peers elsewhere) that teaching students to write better will help themselves, the instructors, write better. One has to practice what one preaches, a happy result when one's attempts to write and publish pay off. I am busier teaching writing now than ever, but I am also writing and publishing now more than ever—it is a happy synergism that I believe all psychologists can use to their advantage.

Goddard: Those are interesting responses. I've always fallen back on rather simplistic notions like "It's the right thing to do" and "It builds character," but some of your reasons fit at the level of basic reinforcement: Do it because it will make you a better (and perhaps more productive) writer yourself. I think I have to confess, though, that teaching writing really increases my workload. Teaching writing and grading writing assignments are very labor-intensive tasks. I think that's another reason why professors are sometimes reluctant to add graded writing to their courses. Do you find that teaching students to write well increases your workload?

Dunn: No question about it: Increasing the number, scope, and depth of writing assignments and then grading them seriously, effortfully, is hard, hard work. Of course, some students write papers that need very little editing—they are confident writers who can organize their papers from start to finish. Other students struggle, which means that I struggle; I literally begin doing line editing, correcting grammar, punctuation, and spelling before I can even get to the larger architecture of the work. The majority of students are in the vast middle—they can write reasonably good prose when required to do so, but they need to refine their techniques, develop a style, and learn to generate text without becoming frustrated, sidetracked, or overwhelmed.

Goddard: Tell me some of the specific strategies you've developed to help you cope with the workload that comes from teaching writing.

Dunn: Several years ago I began to encourage students to bring rough drafts of their papers to me during office hours—I agreed to read and comment on what they wrote (before it was due) as long as they agreed to listen, take notes, and discuss the paper with me when I finished reading it. I will read a draft only if the writer is physically present when I do so (I would be overwhelmed by other work and never get to it otherwise). Besides, I find students benefit from hearing my reactions as well as seeing my handwritten comments. I wish more students took advantage of my offer, but those who do benefit from it—and so do I—as their final papers are always a pleasure to read because they have taken their writing so seriously.

I also try to rely on some economies of scale (for example, peer reading and reviewing of drafts, sending students to the writing center). I try to pace myself, staggering writing assignments within my different classes so as not to have two major papers due in the same week (a lesson I learned from bitter personal experience). As with most things in academic life, it's all in the planning.

Goddard: You obviously include a lot of writing assignments in all your classes, but you have smaller classes and a lower teaching load than some (like me, for instance). What other advice do you have for faculty who want to add more writing without becoming overwhelmed?

Dunn: My own tactic is to try different types of writing for different types and levels of courses. Besides American Psychological Association (APA) style research papers, of course, I have students write *Psychological Bulletin* style review papers in upper level courses and seminars. I also have students write several thought or reaction papers to books, films, topical issues in all course levels—no more than two or three pages. These are not research papers, but brief expository essays that I find students like to write (i.e., express their opinions, often boldly) and that are quite enough of a challenge for them. A term paper is daunting, but a short paper poses its own challenges, especially when I do not permit any plot summary (if it is a review of a book or film) or recapitulation of a question (in the case of expository writing). Thought papers take less time to grade, so you can assign more of them during a 15-week semester—if you assign five, for example, you have had students write in the neighborhood of a 15 or so page term paper (but the collective writing here is usually much more interesting, and the feedback you give on consecutive papers improves their subsequent efforts). I have students write letters to each other about difficult concepts in statistics and methods, and I try to use essay exams exclusively in 200- and 300-level classes. Instructors need to mix things up a bit or they risk being overwhelmed or becoming bored reading and grading writing.

Goddard: In the process of preparing to teach my Writing in Psychology course, I read many of the *ToP* papers about teaching writing and I got many excellent ideas from them. However, one paper (Willingham, 1990) really gave me pause. The author recommended that one should demand technical competence in writing, and that students who have not yet achieved such technical competence are capable of doing so on their own if the expectations for such competence are sufficiently clear. My reaction to Willingham's paper was that his approach may work at his university, but I doubt very seriously whether it would work at mine. What do you think? What approach do you take toward students' mechanical errors?

Dunn: I am familiar with Willingham's (1990) paper. I understand his argument but, based on my own experience as teacher and writer, I don't agree with it. My students would struggle if I did not correct or discuss their surface errors; indeed, I've found that sometimes it is impossible to work on a paper's content until grammar,

style, and punctuation issues are ironed out (with all due respect to Willingham). I am sure there are some students who can write grammatically sound papers "if the expectations for such competence are sufficiently clear," but not many. There are several things I do about mechanical errors—but the errors must be acknowledged, worked through, and dealt with. First, my college has a writing center run by the English Department. I automatically send students with a limited command of grammar there for remedial help, as well as for guidance in drafting and polishing papers (the student mentors who work there send faculty members periodic progress reports). Second, if a student's grammar problems are not severe, I tackle them when I read a rough draft during my office hours. Third, I rely on their peers. I have students read what they write out loud in class on occasion (this encourages careful preparation). I also do in-class "round robins" where students pass out multiple copies of their rough drafts to peers, who do the same. In the course of critiquing drafts, these peers will identify, highlight, and correct mechanical problems. Fourth, I invoke them to take mechanical issues seriously and suggest that they consult their writing handbooks (the *Bedford Handbook,* Hacker, 2002, is currently used in our freshmen writing course).

Goddard: I understand you're planning to teach Writing for Psychology next spring. What assignments do you plan, and where does the course fit into Moravian's curriculum?

Dunn: I am teaching the course as a special topic offering for juniors and seniors, especially those considering or doing honors research or planning on going to graduate school. If the course proves to be popular, it might be added to the permanent curriculum. I'm going to have the students write a lit review paper on a topic of their own choosing as well as an APA-style empirical manuscript (I will probably supply them with some data or we will collect some as a class). I also want students to write a case report, something I figured out how to do by reading your upcoming *ToP* paper (Goddard, in press). I'm also planning to assign some journal writing or other reflective writing, just to get them in the habit of writing each day, if only for a short time. I will also have them write a review of a recent book in psychology, say, 1,000 or so words and then, to illustrate the importance of concise summaries, have them reduce it to 200 words. I'm also going to borrow your idea, Perilou, of having them write a conference abstract—I am shameless when it comes to borrowing writing ideas.

Goddard: I'm glad the article had some ideas you could use. I really like the conference abstract because it's a real-world project. Many of our students submit abstracts to regional and national conferences, so this is a task they may really put to use soon. I also like making the project a collaboration, in part because it gives me fewer papers to grade, and in part because collaboration is how most of my own conference papers have come about.

When I was preparing to teach my Writing in Psychology course for the first time, I consulted with NKU's writing coordinator about teaching methods. One technique she recommended was peer editing. I have to admit that I was initially skeptical and thought this was just a nice way to fill class time. However, I'm convinced now that the technique is really useful. Tell me more about how you employ peer editing in your classes.

Dunn: My view is reality based, I think: Any exposure to peer editing is something, so even a small good is better than nothing. My first rule for doing peer editing involves adopting compassion and respect for the writing of peers. I tell students that the golden rule applies, that the tone and depth of their written and verbal comments regarding peer writing should match the ideal they would like to receive from peers. I find this works. Second, I emphasize the importance of being fair to others in all my classes. Such a criterion might not seem relevant to writing, but it is. I remind students that they owe their peers a high level of work because those same peers are (presumably) taking their respective work seriously—there is, in other words, a social contract of fairness. I spend a good deal of class time illustrating how to give concrete, helpful, but critical feedback on writing, everything from writing legibly, to looking a peer in the eye when discussing his or her paper, to never (never!) using red pen, to finding something nice to say about any (every) piece of writing (no matter how dry, dull, or poorly written). I encourage appropriate feedback through example, too: When I write comments on student papers, I try my hardest to write a full paragraph at the end of the last page, wherein I say at least one positive thing while pointing out something else I wish the writer had considered doing.

Goddard: How do you handle peer editing when students vary greatly in their writing skills?

Dunn: Students' writing skills do vary a great deal—this is the reality we all work with—so it is the case that worse writers are commenting on the work of better writers. I believe that this is actually all to the good. Why? Well, I believe that good writing evolves from exposure to good reading, so peer essays (especially the good ones) are better than nothing. Less well-equipped writers can at least learn something about style, form, and content from good writers; indeed, with any luck, they may try to emulate them.

Goddard: What advice do you have for students (or faculty) who freeze at the sight of a blank page or empty computer screen? How can we get over our anxiety?

Dunn: Long ago I adopted the writing philosophy of Robert Boice, an excellent writer and psychologist who has studied the process and pitfalls of academic writers. Boice claims (and he is not alone) that writing must become something that an individual does automatically, not some activity that is placed on a pedestal or that requires special time and attention. The best writers write every day; they make it a routine. I found that advice liberating and I follow it as much as I can. I never have trouble getting started, for example; I just sit down and the words come (of course, that doesn't mean they don't have to be revised later—that's another story but still part of the process).

Goddard: I can't write anything important without writing an outline first. Once I've got my outline sorted out, I

know what my logical flow is going to be, and I usually don't have much trouble writing at that point. I'm such a believer in outlining that I require students writing research papers for me to submit a detailed outline first. I tell them it's a form of primary prevention: If I can see where their logical flow is not clear, I can sometimes prevent them from writing papers that will earn a low grade.

Dunn: I've always been a planful writer, starting things well in advance of deadlines (it was actually a mode of survival before the ubiquity of computers—I was a terrible typist, so during college I'd have to finish a paper 2 days before it was due—it would take me that long to type a clean, presentable copy). But I know that the blank page intimidates some of my students. Students need to realize that as an activity, writing does not have to be so daunting. Routine, warm-up exercises, freewriting, and simple familiarity with the task will help them get started with ease—but getting them to create a routine, to try exercises, or to write regularly so that it becomes familiar—even fun!—is the hard part. In my new book on writing in psychology, I assume that forewarned is forearmed—when students realize that their anxieties are shared by practically everyone (including people who write all the time), they may be motivated to try to overcome them by adopting some practical skills.

Goddard: Do you ever share your own writing pitfalls with students?

Dunn: Yes, I do. I tell them that for years I was a slave to the passive voice (most psychologists—most social scientists—are). I tell them that I routinely write dull opening and concluding paragraphs in my papers, that I inevitably delete them or rewrite them in the final draft. I tell them that it took time for me to learn that revision is still writing, and that it has to be done no matter how much care you put into a paper's outline or a given draft. I tell them that though it often pains me to do so (writing can be all blood, toil, tears, and sweat), I absolutely reorganize things when they don't read well.

Goddard: The last time I taught my writing course, I was in the process of responding to reviews on my *ToP* paper. I told my students that I had tried my best to write with all possible skill. Nonetheless, the reviewers and editor found many writing-related problems. I passed the manuscript around and let the students see what the editor had marked–I think this humbling experience made me seem more human to them.

You've mentioned the book you're working on now (*A Short Guide to Writing About Psychology*). Tell me a bit more about it. What is the target audience? When do you expect it to be released?

Dunn: The book is aimed at psychology students who want to learn to write using APA style, though I hope that graduate students and faculty members will find it to be a useful work, as well. Besides style issues, my book discusses how to search and read the psychological literature; how to choose a topic and then outline, draft, write, and revise a paper; and how to seek constructive feedback on writing, among other topics. The book should go to press sometime in the summer of 2003 and be available for courses that fall.

Goddard: What other resources do you recommend for psychology students and professors who want to improve their writing and their teaching of writing?

Dunn: I think books and articles by Bob Boice, the *A Community of Writers* text by Elbow and Belanoff (1995), Linda Flower's (1981) book *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing* (and her various articles with John R. Hayes), various papers and chapters by Barbara Nodine (Arcadia University), and the occasional writing pieces published in *ToP* are very good places to start. Instructors can then branch out to reading articles in *College English* and various edited books on teaching writing—there are a lot of them covering everything from teaching grammar to expository writing. I collect resources on writing and reading about writing, so here is a long list I've been compiling.

Resources

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