

# How Students Develop Skill and Identity in an Agricultural Communications Writing Course

Holli R. Leggette and Holly Jarvis

## Abstract

*Writing is more than a means of communication. It is one way students can gain knowledge and develop their personal and professional identity. The purpose of this study was to understand students' perspectives on how they developed skill and identity as writers in an agricultural communications writing course. Fifteen students wrote one-page student reflections about their experience in Agricultural Media Writing I. The reflections were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis, which was guided by the seven vectors identified in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity. After analyzing the one-page reflections, the data fit vectors one, two, three, four, five, and six but did not fit vector seven. College students in this course developed competence, the ability to manage their emotions, a balance between autonomy and independence, intimate relationships, professional identity, and purpose. Each student's reflections demonstrated growth in these areas as a direct result of participating in the course. Students changed as writers because of the course, identified several andragogical techniques that enabled their success in the course, and grew in their professional identities as writers. Additionally, students mastered content and built a toolbox full of writing tools they can use as they progress through their education and become professionals. Extending the education and identity theory into writing education models and writing competency models would provide a unique aspect of the role students' self-perceived identity plays in their abilities to produce text.*

## Key Words

Writing, writing-intensive course, education and identity

## Introduction

Writing is more than a means of communication; it is a pathway to self-actualization, as claimed by Rohman and Wlecke (1964). They explained that “in writing a person is satisfying his [or her] basic needs for self-affirmation as well as the immediate practical needs for communication” (p. 10). Writing helps students “clarify thoughts and assumptions, hone analytical skills, and touch inner feelings” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 61).

Writing is a constructive process shaped and carried out in a complex environment guided by the attitudes and feelings of not only the writer but also the society and people who surround him or her (Flower, 1994). The conceptual model of writing expertise draws on the theory of discourse community, that writers become a part of a community and build on each other's ideas and developments (Beaufort, 2007). The discourse community establishes norms, values, beliefs, and environments specific to that community or shared with overlapping communities and defines and stabilizes boundaries relative to that particular community (Beaufort, 1999; Beaufort).

If students are intellectually competent, they can “construct meaning, using words, images, and theories” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 63). Chickering and Reisser explained that a part of col-

lege student maturation is becoming an effective oral and written communicator and developing a professional identity and purpose as part of their career training. In a 2005 study by Sitton, Cartmell, and Sargent, communications professionals agreed editing the work of others, writing with the appropriate style, and applying writing skills in a real-world situation were important communication proficiencies. However, Watson and Robertson (2011) found students valued working in teams but did not think editing others' work was an important skill. Students may not see the impact of society and community on effective communication and skill development. But, coming back to Chickering and Reisser's theory of education and identity, students can develop skills in listening, questioning, reflecting, and communicating if they are given opportunities to learn in an environment that encourages them to search for knowledge.

"The task of understanding student writers — digging down to uncover their fears, their blind spots, the bad habits acquired early in life — has always been difficult for teachers of writing at all grade levels" (Lingwall & Kuehn, 2013, p. 379). Providing students with an environment that encourages self-revelation and interpretation within a judgment-free classroom context is important in helping instructors and students discover and address their deficiencies (Lingwall & Kuehn). Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested college students need opportunities to exercise their skills within a supportive environment to move from being a dependent learner to an independent learner prepared for a successful career.

Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014) argued students construct meaning as they provide feedback for their peers — "the catalyst for meaning construction is not an external input, rather it is an input generated directly by the students themselves as they engage in making critical judgements [*sic*]" (p. 118). Critical instructor-to-student and student-to-student feedback provides students with the opportunity to focus their learning by differentiating what they know and do not know (Chickering & Reisser).

"Writing pedagogy, then, no longer restricted itself to matters of convention but moved on to consider human encoders and decoders in an ever changing situational context" (Schiff, 2010, p. 163). Cohen (1981) stated good teaching included six dimensions, two of which were interaction and feedback. Students should have the opportunity to experiment with writing in a supportive yet challenging environment that encourages the generation of material before the final stages of the writing process (Vilardi, 1986). Furthermore, in 2006, Bok argued repeated opportunities to write and receive timely feedback from faculty members will help undergraduate students become more effective writers.

Schiff (2010) stated that "in-class writing assignments followed by immediate peer and instructor feedback were absolutely essential to effective college composition pedagogy" (p. 162). Schiff claimed he assigns the most important assignments as in-class assignments, which is supported in research by Barcelow-Hill and Rowan (1984). During in-class assignments, Schiff interacted with students to provide immediate feedback because it is better to address a problem as it occurs than after it has occurred. According to Beach and Friedrich (2006), faculty members' feedback during the writing composition process is instrumental in how and to what extent students revise their writing assignments. Schiff further explained that, if a student's work is not well received in class, the stigma of substandard writing will carry into the student's writing done away from the formal classroom. Faculty members must be careful, therefore, not to project their persona as a lens when providing students feedback on their writing assignments because students could interrupt the feedback as negative (Hyland, 1998; Taylor, 2002).

Additionally, Schunk and Swartz (1993) argued writing process goals and progress feedback

improved writing strategy, skill, and self-efficacy. Aligning process goals with progress feedback has more of an effect on self-efficacy and competence than incorporating the two independent of each other (Schunk & Swartz). Self-efficacy for writing is an individual's beliefs that he or she can produce text (Schunk & Swartz). According to Schunk and Swartz, if students felt competent in their writing, they were more likely to write and invest resources in their writing. Pajares and Valiante (2006) noted self-efficacy is a foundation for classroom achievement and argued students' beliefs in their abilities give them the motivation to be persistent and reach their goals. Further, students' confidence in their ability to complete a writing assignment is impacted by their hesitancy to write and apprehension of writing (Pajares & Valiante).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Chickering and Reisser's theory of education and identity (1993) "present[s] a comprehensive picture of psychosocial development during the college years" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 67). Students move through seven vectors of identity development toward individualization, sometimes simultaneously or at different times and rates. "Vectors do build on each other, leading to greater complexity, stability, and integration as the issues related to each one are addressed" (Evans et al., pp. 66–67).

Developing competence, first vector, is a pitchfork of competence that has three tines: intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Intellectual competence is "skill in using one's mind," which includes "mastering content ... [and] building a repertoire of skills to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize" (p. 45). Whereas, physical and manual competence includes athletic achievement, competitiveness, and development of strength, fitness, and self-discipline (Chickering & Reisser), interpersonal competence is two-fold — development of listening, cooperating, and communicating skills and development of positive contribution to complex relationships and group functions (Chickering & Reisser). Developing competence is "people's assessment of their capabilities" (p. 53), which is subjective (Chickering & Reisser). Competence is a stem of the confidence tree — confidence in the self and believing one has the physical and mental power to master tasks (Chickering & Reisser), such as writing for media outlets and Associated Press (AP) style.

Managing emotions is the second vector where students learn how to recognize, accept, and express emotions; release tension and frustration before it impacts other areas of their lives (Chickering & Reisser, 1993); and "act on feelings in a responsible manner" (Evan et al., 2010, p. 67). Inevitably, students experience multiple types and levels of emotions — from depression and anger to optimism and inspiration (Chickering & Reisser). These emotions, if not handled properly and in a timely manner, can cause students to become overwhelmed.

Students experience vector three when they become self-sufficient and move through autonomy toward interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Here, students develop a sense of self-direction and mobility and the ability to solve problems (Evans et al., 2010). They learn to take responsibility for their goals and the consequences that follow their decisions (Chickering & Reisser). Students who are interdependent know when to give and when to take. They learn to be emotionally independent (free from constant feedback) and instrumentally independent (thinking critically and independently) before recognizing and accepting their interdependence (Chickering & Reisser).

In vector four, students develop mature interpersonal relationships, which include "tolerance and appreciation of differences [and] capacity for intimacy" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 48). Students develop the ability to choose and nurture strong, healthy relationships that can endure hardships.

They learn to be less dependent and dominant in their relationships and to be more equal through sharing, accepting differences, and appreciating assets (Chickering & Reisser).

Vector five, establishing identity, is dependent on the aforementioned vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 2010). “It leads to clarity and stability and a feeling of warmth for this core self as capable, familiar, worthwhile” (Chickering & Reisser, p. 50). Students establish identity through comfort with body, appearance, gender, and sexual orientation; sense of their social and cultural heritage and their ability to respond to feedback from those they deem as important; clarification of themselves through their role in society; and personal acceptance, esteem, stability, and integration (Chickering & Reisser).

Developing purpose, vector six, is “developing clear vocational goals, making meaningful commitments to specific personal interests and activities, and establishing strong interpersonal commitments” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 69). Students learn to assess their abilities, interests, and options; set goals and develop action plans before making decisions based on those goals and action plans; and persevere despite obstacles (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Learning to balance family, lifestyle, and intimate relationships with vocational interests is a lesson in developing purpose (Chickering & Reisser).

Developing integrity, which is related to establishing identity and developing purpose, has “three sequential but overlapping stages” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 51) — humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence. As students progress through college, they develop a more relative, humanistic values system that balances their interests with the interests of others (Chickering & Reisser; Evans et al., 2010). To personalize values and develop core beliefs, students examine others’ values and beliefs and affirm their beliefs while learning to acknowledge and respect the beliefs of others (Chickering & Reisser; Evans et al.). Students develop congruence between their behavior and values after personalizing their beliefs.

In addition to the seven vectors, Chickering and Reisser (1993) acknowledged the environment plays an important role in students’ identity formation. Students’ identity formation process is nurtured by an environment that gives them opportunities to play different roles, have a choice, gain achievement, be free from anxiety, and have time to reflect on experience (Knefelkamp, Widisk, & Parker, 1978). Chickering and Reisser added students’ identity formation environments should include “interaction with diverse individuals and ideas,” “receiving feedback and making objective self-assessments,” and “involvement in activities that foster self-esteem and understanding of one’s social and cultural heritage” (p. 207).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) added *Education and Identity* included seven environmental influences: institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, friendships and student communities, and student development programs and services. Chickering and Reisser stated accessibility, authenticity, student communication, and student knowledge were components of student-faculty relationships. Evans et al. (2010) summarized Chickering and Reisser and stated students must perceive their faculty members as being real people who have interest in the lives of students and want to communicate with them. Likewise, curriculum should recognize differences among individuals and help students understand what they are learning and why they are learning it (Evans et al.). The teaching influence should include active learning, interaction with students, timely feedback, high expectations, and an understanding and appreciation of student diversity (Evans et al.). Chickering and Reisser’s argument solidifies the need for college instructors to be an active and influential part of the educational process.

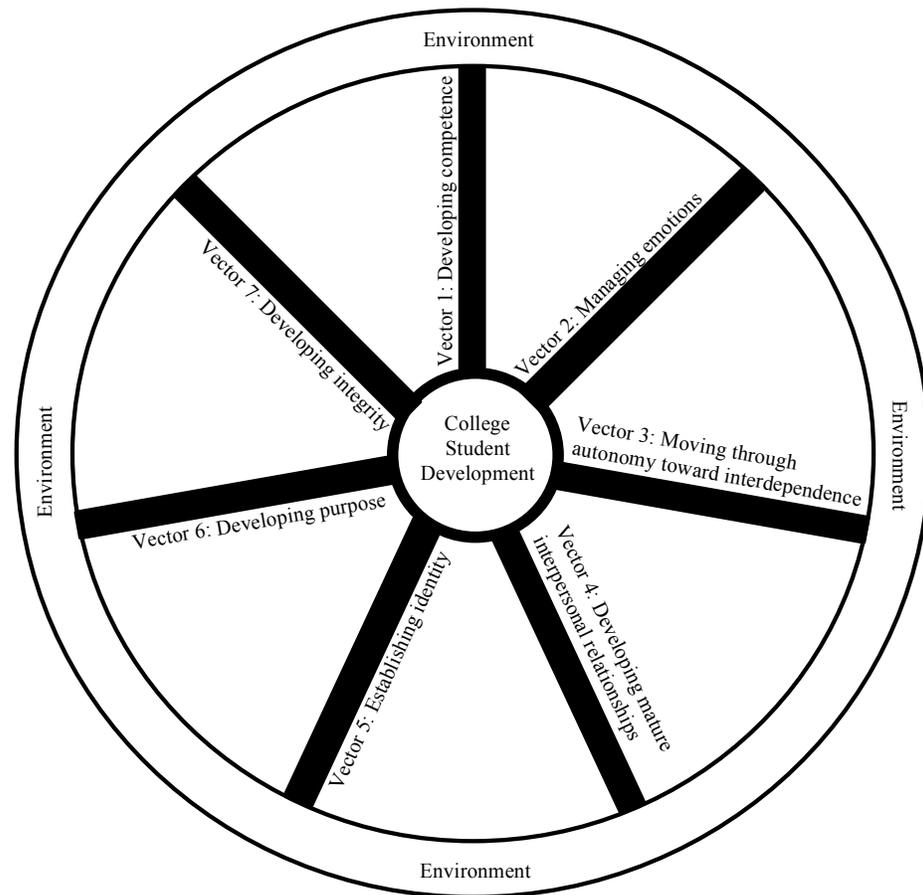


Figure 1. Depicting Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity as a wagon wheel. College student development is the hub supported by the seven vectors and secured by the environment.

### Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand students' perspectives on how they developed skill and identity as writers in an agricultural communications writing course. Three research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: How do students develop relationships, manage emotions and move toward interdependence in an agricultural communications writing course?
- RQ2: What writing instructional techniques made the most difference in competency growth from the students' perspective?
- RQ3: How does an agricultural communications writing course help students develop their professional identity and purpose as writers?

### Context of the Study

*Agricultural Media Writing I* is an undergraduate agricultural communications writing course and the first of two writing courses Texas A&M University agricultural communications and journalism majors and minors are required to complete. It is designed for the beginning writer. Students learn

the basics of journalistic writing — news gathering, writing, editing, *Associated Press Stylebook*, and media ethics and law. Course content includes news identification, audience analysis, basic news writing forms (e.g., inverted pyramid), attribution, and interviewing. Students are exposed to writing for multiple types of news media: print, broadcast, and online. After completing the course, students should have the skills to identify and gather news from various stakeholder audiences, organize information into an appropriate form for communication media, use a writing style consistent with the audience and medium, and write clear, accurate and engaging copy targeted at a specific audience and medium. The course is taught each fall, spring, and summer semester.

The summer 2012 semester was a 10-week course that met four days a week for an hour and 35 minutes each day. As part of the course, students were asked to complete a writing assignment at least three days a week to help them to develop consistently as a writer. The instructor lectured about a topic and provided the students with a lab assignment related to the lecture. For example, the instructor lectured about attribution and gave the students a list of facts and quotes they attributed using journalism techniques. While the students were completing the lab assignments, the instructor walked through the classroom and provided assistance as needed. Students received both oral and written feedback on each lab assignment. Also, the students were asked to complete four AP style quizzes each week. Each paper-based quiz had 10 to 20 sentences with AP style mistakes, and the students were expected to correct those mistakes.

Additionally, the students were asked to complete four major assignments: leads, covering a news conference/speaker, single-source story, and multiple-source story. The lead assignment was completed in lab, and the students were not given the chance to rewrite because they had produced a similar lab assignment during the previous class period. The second major assignment was completed outside of class, but the students listened to the speaker as part of an in-class presentation. Students were required to write a 1.5- to 2-page story highlighting the most important information from the speech. The students did not have an opportunity to rewrite this assignment.

Further, the third major assignment was completed based on a topic of the student's choice. Students were required to write a single-source story approximately 1 to 1.5 pages and provide a source sheet with information about their interviewee. They worked on this assignment in lab and received peer reviews before submitting the final draft. The fourth major assignment was completed based on a topic of the student's choice, also. Students were required to write a multiple-source story that included two personal interviews and one printed source. The story was 2 to 2.5 pages in length and written for publication in the local newspaper. The students worked on the assignment in lab, were required to have at least two peers review their story, attended a mandatory instructor/student meeting, and rewrote the story if desired.

During the course, the instructor worked to create a relationship with the students that was authentic, fostering, and encouraging. The classroom environment was an open forum for communication about writing and course assignments and curriculum. Students were able to communicate with their peers and instructor as needed during the course meeting time. Additionally, students were able to have freedom to choose their writing topics and tailor their curriculum to their needs by choosing to participate and engage themselves in various levels of classroom interaction. Students were required to complete peer reviews on at least one assignment but were not forced to interact with their instructor or peers beyond that. However, each student chose to interact on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

During each class meeting, the instructor provided students with ongoing formative feedback in an individual and group setting. The instructor provided formative feedback on each section of the

writing assignment and summative feedback at the end of each assignment. Students received timely instructor feedback on each assignment. The students showed evidence of their goals to meet the instructor's high expectations when they discussed the rigor of the course and how difficult it was to earn an A in the course. Students were encouraged to learn from their mistakes and to develop as writers in a challenging learning environment.

## Method

This qualitative study explored how students developed skill and identity as writers in an agricultural communications writing course. The data were not collected based on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity, but after further examination, the data fit six of the seven vectors. The goal of this content analysis was to extend the application of writing instruction theory in light of education and identity. Patton (2002) termed this process analytic induction and promoted it for examining phenomena in light of a widely accepted theory. The population for this qualitative study was undergraduates students enrolled in *Agricultural Media Writing I* at Texas A&M University during the summer 2012 semester ( $N = 15$ ). The students were mostly female upper-class students who were agricultural communications and journalism majors. All of the students had completed more than one course in the major, and most had completed more than four courses in the major (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Student Demographics and TAMU Agricultural Communications Courses Taken*

	Students ( $N = 15$ )
Gender	
Male	3
Female	12
Classification	
U3 (completion of 60 to 94 hours)	9
U4 (completion of 95+ hours)	6
Major	
Agricultural Communications and Journalism	12
Other than Agricultural Communications and Journalism	3
Courses Taken	
<i>Introduction to Agricultural Communications</i>	10
<i>Theory and Practice of Agricultural Publishing</i>	3
<i>Theory and Practice of Agricultural Public Relations</i>	9
<i>Electronic Media Production in Agricultural Communications</i>	4
<i>Workshop in Agricultural Communications and Journalism</i>	2
<i>Communicating Agricultural Information to the Public</i>	2
<i>Agricultural Public Relations Methods</i>	1

Data for this study were one-page student reflections the instructor kept for course evaluation purposes. Additionally, observations were conducted during class time. At the end of the semester, students were asked to reflect on their experiences in *Agricultural Media Writing I* and complete a

final one-page writing assignment with four questions.

1. Describe yourself as a writer before this class and now.
2. What class activities helped you the most (e.g., peer review, instructor feedback, AP style quizzes)?
3. At what point in the course did you begin to see writing differently?
4. How has this course helped develop your idea of writing as a profession?

Each participant was assigned a random two-digit number identifier from one to 15. Data was unitized, as each unit was assigned a separate, sequential code (For example, the ninth unit of participant two would be coded as 02:09.). Researchers performed a content analysis of the reflection data. Content analysis is “a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way, through an analysis of their communications” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 472). The seven vectors of college student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) were used as a guide for data analysis. Researchers discussed the data throughout the analysis and reviewed data three times to ensure it had been coded correctly (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation was achieved by using multiple methods for data collection, including observation, student reflections, and Chickering and Reisser’s theory of education and identity. To achieve transferability, thick description was used in the results to allow readers to make inferences about the applicability of this study to their own context. As data was discussed throughout data analysis, researchers kept an audit trail, a methodological journal, and peer debriefing memos for dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Findings**

College students in this course developed competence, the ability to manage their emotions, a balance between autonomy and independence, intimate relationships, professional identity, and purpose. Further, each student’s reflections demonstrated growth in these areas as a direct result of participating in the course.

### **Research Question 1**

Students who participated in this study said they developed relationships, managed emotions, and moved toward interdependence as part of the agricultural communications writing course. Students claimed they liked the close relationships they developed with their instructor and peers and reported the class size was important to the development of these relationships and their learning. “I’ve never had a class this small before, and the small-class atmosphere was great for learning how to write for the media” (9.07). Small class size promoted “interaction (communication) between the students and teacher,” which “was my favorite part” (9.07). Further, “This has been one of my favorite classes I have taken my entire college career ... because I have had more of a personal relationship with my teacher and I have had lots of help and encouragement from my peers” (10.05).

Students also had to manage their emotions to meet the challenges of the course. At the beginning of the course, students were “worried about taking writing courses” (5.04). One student reported, “Before I [be]came an agricultural communications and journalism major I hated to write. I always preferred to take math courses or sciences courses because I could study for the exams” (5.01). However, the data indicated the students shifted their feelings throughout the course. “I enjoyed

taking this class. I did not have a positive outlook on it in the beginning, but my perception changed quickly” (13.09).

Additionally, students reported they did not like the writing activities, but they reflected positively on the activities and saw several changes in their writing throughout the course. “Honestly, the class activities that assisted me the best would have to be the ones that I disliked the most, and those were the actual major writing assignments. Though I did not like them, they forced me to deal with my problem with writing” (14.04). Another student wrote, “The AP style tests that we took were very tedious. Honestly, they were my least favorite part of the class but probably the most helpful” (6.05). Students saw the benefit of each assignment, and over time, students reported experiencing a change in their feelings about the course. “After the first couple of assignments, I saw myself begin to improve. This really helped me stay focused throughout the summer and work hard at increasing my knowledge of how to write well” (11.09).

As students moved toward interdependence, they claimed an increased self-knowledge of their goals in their professions. “I found that being objective is difficult, but that is what news writing is all about. I know that I am not a good writer, but I am willing to work” (11.02-03). Students reflected that this self-knowledge helped them understand what it took to be a writer. “After taking this course I have gained confidence in my writing skills, and would say I am getting closer to my goal of being a great writer” (5.11). One student reported that her “biggest strength is telling a story” but also feeling “as though I have a good amount of things to learn going ahead with my future before I can be the writer I want to be” (12.03).

Students not only reported they changed in their motivation to write but also reported shifts in how they approached writing assignments. “Whether it was a test or a paper, I always just went through it once and turned it in. I threw caution to the wind and whatever I got was what I got. This class has helped me to see the benefits of rewriting, editing, and reevaluating your work before your final submission” (13.06).

Furthermore, students noted the class helped them plan for their own writing success, a part of developing autonomy (the third vector). “I wrote the last assignment the easiest. Though I waited to the last minute possible to write my paper, the actual time I spent writing it was shorter than usual even though the length requirement was longer” (14.07). Another student reported enjoying problem solving in class: “The AP style quizzes I actually enjoyed; call me a nerd but I enjoyed fixing the sentences. I felt like Sherlock Holmes finding the problem to solve the sentence” (4.05).

### **Research Question 2**

Students noted they realized their skills developed as the course progressed. One student reflected that it was “towards the middle ... when writing really started to look differently, and I began to differentiate the styles and know in what situations the different styles were needed” (12.07). Without this mental shift, “I would have probably written a news story the same way I did everything else” (2.07-8). Another student reflected, “I didn’t realize how much I would have to change my style of writing but I can [now]” (3.02).

Furthermore, students experienced challenges with some of the skills presented in the class. “When I got into this class, it really challenged me. ... I struggled a lot with attribution and shortening what I would usually elaborate on” (6.02-03). Student seven elaborated: “To make it even more challenging, I was asked to write succinctly in a way that was so interesting that a reader would be compelled to read more” (7.06). Not only were audience, condensation of information and attribution challenging, so was “finding credible sources” (15.04). One student noted this course was the

beginning of a longer process of learning how to be a writer. “I am still battling with keeping the old styles out of my writing, but I feel as though it will be a process that will take more time than a single semester” (12.07).

To combat the challenges in the course, students identified the techniques (class discussion and AP style quizzes) that helped them develop competence as writers. Students claimed the AP style quizzes were difficult but helpful even though they took students several hours outside of class to complete. “Being able to talk about our papers and discuss different scenarios helped me understand the material better, as well as helped me remember what I did wrong so that I would not make the same mistake again. Even though the AP quizzes were time consuming, I feel that they were helpful in putting the *AP Stylebook* to use and gave me different types of sentences that I could practice on” (2.04-5). Chickering and Reisser (1993) claimed persisting despite obstacles was a part of students’ ability to develop purpose (vector six). The attention to detail the students gained while completing the AP style quizzes and discussing assignments is something they can transfer to their careers.

By developing writing competency, students began to enjoy writing and see their role as writers differently. “This course opened my eyes to a different writing world that I have learned to understand and enjoy” (2.07-8). Student eight expanded on developing competence and said “After taking this class, even though I know I could have written a news article before and it would have been OK, I am comfortable with saying that I would do a really good job now” (8.02). Not all students, however, reported being drawn to media writing as a career but said they “can appreciate this style of writing more [and] feel more confident as a writer in many ways after taking this course” (3.02).

During and after the course, students noted they had a newfound respect for journalism and saw the need for writing without extraneous material. Students “learned to like more of the journalistic side of writing” (6.02-3) and were challenged by the course. Most recognized this was the beginning of a larger journey to becoming a writer and learned to shift their thinking to a new style.

### Research Question 3

Students reflected positively on the opportunity to develop their sense of writing in relation to their personal identity, and some reported developing a clear sense of purpose in their lives as a result of the class. Two students reported feeling no desire to become writers, but that they were more “comfortable with communicating” (14.09) in written form and more “prepared to enter the writing profession” (12.08) after the course. Although these two students acknowledged that they had no desire to “end up in a writing profession” (12.08), they believed that writing was “highly important in any field one goes into” (14.09).

Other students, however, reported feeling more drawn to writing professions and prepared for a writing career after the course. “I have enjoyed writing as a journalist, and I definitely feel that I have found the right major for me” (1.08). One student noted a change in her career aspirations: “I haven’t ever really considered being a journalist but learning more about this has made it a lot more interesting and appealing (10.02). ... I have thought more about the writing aspect of my future job and how being a good journalist will help me succeed” (10.7-8). Another student described the career potential she found through this course — “What I do want to do is be a voice for those who need someone to speak for them. Maybe with more experience in media writing I will gain the confidence to be a hard news reporter” (7.09).

Additionally, establishing identity as a professional is an important part of college student development, and students reported the course helped develop their perceptions of the writing field. One student compared the course to a real-world writing experience: “It felt like a real life situation where

you would have an editor to help you improve your writing prior to the deadline. Good editors make good writers, and being able to receive feedback instead of just a number grade helps a student to actually know what areas they need to improve on rather just guessing and hoping they get it right” (13.04). Another student described that “being able to ask questions and talk about why we do things the way we do” (9.08) was a positive experience of being in this writing class. He went on to describe the contrast of this course experience with others in different fields: “That’s why math sucks. The ‘it’s-right-because-I-said-so’ mentality never sat well with me” (9.08).

Students noted class size was important in their development as writers because, often times, classes are too large for student success and nurture. The small class size allowed students the time to respond to peer and instructor feedback, which students noted helped change their writing. “The activities that helped me the most were peer review and instructor feedback” (3.03). Students noted instructor feedback was important because “it reassures the students that they are on the right path [and] they have the opportunities to ask questions and receive some insight on how to improve their paper” (4.06).

Furthermore, students attributed their successes to several different techniques used in the course. One student said “Practice, practice, practice!” (7.03) was the key to her success. Others noted the instructor’s “accessibility was very helpful to us all” (1.03-4). Peer feedback was identified as the single biggest contributor to student success in the course. “The best thing that we did in my opinion was when we had time during class to write a story on a certain topic and then had time to peer review to make changes” (12.04). Peer feedback allowed students to respond to others in a constructive context so that “a lot of the careless mistakes would be caught before turning in the paper” (12.04-05).

As a result of the course, students said they experienced changes in their writing habits during the course. Students claimed they gained writing skills, ability to manage emotions, competence to plan for success, close peer relationships, opportunity to respond to the feedback of those peers, and clarity in personal identity and professional goals.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Students in the summer 2012 *Agricultural Media Writing I* course progressed in their writing skill and self-perception as writers. Just as Rohman and Wlecke found in 1964, writing was more than communication for these students — it was a way for them to develop their identity and self-concept. Students changed as writers because of the course, and they identified several andragogical techniques used in the course that enabled their success. Also, based on Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) description of professional identity in their theory of education and identity, students grew in their professional identities as writers.

Promotion of a writing-friendly learning environment helps students change to have more competence and confidence in their writing skills. Students saw their successes and allowed that to feed changes in their emotional outlook. Human beings will often ignore opportunities and challenges outside of their comfort zones because of the fear to fail. Ignoring a skill such as writing could lead to lack of career opportunities. Therefore, students were required to write regularly to face their fears and problems with writing, which Chickering and Reisser described “developing new frames of reference” (p. 45) as important in vector one. Writing regularly helped students work through their problems and gain confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Because students were asked to complete assignments in steps, they were required to take the time to attend to each step and make revisions before moving on. Students are accustomed to sitting down, writing a paper, and turning the paper in without reviewing, revising, or editing their final

product. This course gave students the opportunity to attend to mistakes and errors and the facilitated time to revise and edit the final product. Students noted the revising and editing stages helped them change as writers and become more confident and competent in their writing ability.

Additionally, students mastered content and built a toolbox full of writing tools they can use as they progress through their education and become professionals, which was noted as a piece of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vector one and five. This course helped students develop a sense of purpose in their lives and identify goals. Intimate peer and instructor relationships (vector four) were critical to students' successes and their development of purpose in the writing professions. Students grew in their professional identities as writers and developed an appreciation for media writing as they developed their skills. Students were able to identify their goals and move toward them (vector six), recognizing they were not fully there yet when it came to being a professional writer. Although many of them will never have a journalism career, they now understand the importance of learning how to present clear, factual information in a succinct way and construct meaning using feedback, which Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014) argued was a reason feedback should be included in higher education.

Students appreciated the opportunity to interact with and learn from their peers on a daily basis. Chickering and Reisser said the development of learning how to receive feedback from others is important to interpersonal competence — a key component in vector one and vector five. Peer review and feedback were the best techniques used in the course because the feedback increased their skill level and helped them not make the same mistake again. The feedback students received in the course provided them with opportunities to become better writers without sacrificing their grades. Just as Schiff stated in 2010, catching a mistake before it becomes a determinant to the student is important in the educational process. Time is limited, but continuous feedback should not be the first to go for the sake of time.

Just as Knefelkamp, Widick, and Parker (1978) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted, environment played a key role in students' successes as they developed into media writers. Making sure large lectures are divided into smaller lab sections helps with the intimacy of the writing environment and the development of mature relationships, Chickering and Reisser's fourth vector. Because this was a small summer class (15 students), one should question if the results would be the same in a large class format. Therefore, this study should be replicated in a larger class using regular feedback from the instructor and peers to see if the class size makes a difference in how students change and develop their professional identities as writers.

The course was not explicitly designed to collect data based on Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of education and identity, but researchers saw the relationship between Chickering and Reisser's theory and writing education during the preliminary review of the data. Therefore, Vector Seven: Developing Integrity was not intentionally excluded, but none of the data indicated a relationship with the seventh vector. Extending the education and identity theory into writing education models and writing competency models would provide a unique aspect of the role students' development of identity plays in their ability to produce text.

### **Implications**

Communications professionals identified editing, adhering to style, and applying writing skills as important to career training (Sitton, Cartmell, & Sargent, 2005). Although, undergraduates do not see those things in the same way (Lingwall & Kuehn, 2013), students need writing experiences that prepare them for the realities of communications careers. In this course, students progressed in

writing skills through peer and instructor feedback, skill quizzes, and access to the instructor. Agricultural communications writing instructors must consider these elements when designing writing courses to help students develop an appreciation for the ways communications professionals view their job skills.

College students do not experience their courses in a vacuum. They are developing as individuals throughout their college experience. Agricultural communications writing instructors should consider students' overall development as people and as professionals by implementing strategies presented in this research. Students are open to forming new relationships, handling their emotions in ways that are more sophisticated, and becoming more interdependent with their peers. They are looking for opportunities to find their purpose and act in a way that matches that purpose, including honing skills they value and that help them accomplish their purpose (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Using peer and instructor feedback, completing skill quizzes, creating a safe environment, and having an instructor who is accessible helps agricultural communications students move forward in development of their personal and professional capabilities.

Undeniably, just as Rohman and Wlecke claimed in 1964, writing is more than a means of communication. It is a pathway to agricultural communications students understanding themselves and their agricultural community. It is one way students can gain knowledge and develop their personal and professional identity.

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### About the Authors

Holli Leggette’s research is focused on understanding, evaluating, and improving writing skills of the present and future professionals in agriculture. Much of her work is based on her conceptual model to augment critical thinking and create knowledge through writing in the social sciences of agriculture. Holly Jarvis’ professional interests include producing learner-centered educational materials, providing professional development for extension specialists, and developing continuing education curricula. She also has extensive experience working in non-profit educational settings.