The following pilot study asks students to explain using a simple survey how much freedom they feel they have in my GSW (General Studies Writing) 1110 course at BGSU (Bowling Green State University). The survey was constructed using Survey Monkey <www.surveymonkey.com> and was administered during the beginning of two different class sessions. The results of the study demonstrate that student perception of freedom is higher than expected. While this might lead one to conclude that the teaching methods/techniques being put to the test have been shown to work in this way, it also leaves opens further questions about variance between student and teacher understanding of freedom.

Introduction

The prime goal of this study is to begin asking pertinent questions about students’ experience of freedom within the courses I teach. That sense of freedom is directly tied to ownership and therefore motivation. Asking directly about motivation or ownership would not likely produce the results I’m after. Multiple factors—often too many to describe individually and/or know—contribute to any given student’s motivation in any course. Similarly, questions of ownership are equally complicated. Creativity, however, involves a realm of control that the
students and I share. The range of possible writing methods, styles, topics, and students’ perceptions of the value put on different aspects of creativity are discernible and in some ways controllable. Since this is a value I hold as a teacher, I want to know if what I’m doing now is working and to what degree. One might test one’s effectiveness by the success rates of one’s students, I prefer to evaluate my performance based on less tangible results such as the level of investment/growth of an individual students within my course. Since such an understanding is as equally complicated and problematic as asking directly about motivation. Personally, I do not try to assess conclusively, rather my goal is to create a conducive environment and to trust in my students to respond. Thus I ask students to comment on their experiences of freedom in my class as a measure of the environment I help to create. Is it an environment that permits freedom of expression and yet still helps students accomplish the university imposed goals and to pass university assessment? As this is a pilot study, this question is not being answered in total, but it does offer insight into the answer and offers direction for future research and study.

Participants

Considering my topic, the natural choices for this study were my existing students. Although in a longer study one might include former students. As with most GSW courses, most of my students are Freshman, though there are a few who don’t fit into that category. At the time my students took the survey both classes of GSW 1110 were using the same syllabus and were structurally identical (23 students for each class), save the change of classroom location. Students had received feedback from me on four pieces of writing, which included one diagnostic essay, two drafts of different papers, and a single final paper. None of these texts were
assessed for the course. However, the second full essay would be receiving assessment the week after administering the survey.

Bias

One of the challenges of a study like this is the divergence of understanding between teacher and student. When I think of writing freedom, I imagine complex post-modern texts, multi-modal compositions, or even texts that have three-dimensional shapes. I think of writing as art in the spaces where text and image differences are sometimes indiscernible from one another. In most cases my students haven’t been exposed to such a breadth of media. What they have been exposed too (websites, for instance) they often assume is something very different from an essay, and since student experience can vary widely, perceptions of freedom can be quite different from student to student. Second, I value creatively very highly, and I see grammar as a system of rules that help me as a writer to construct meaning. Many of my students do not share this vision either. Grammar is often seen as a monster that controls and regulates their writing. And lastly, my participants are all my students, and in general students have a desire to please. Having not been assessed yet, students may be more inclined to say what they think I want than to offer the truth. Were it possible, this study might more accurately reflect students’ overall experience if it were administered at a few intervals including after the course had concluded (ideally with all the same participants).

Procedure

The eight question survey (represented by the data included at the end of this document) was administered to students in both GSW 1110 classes on October 6th, 2011. It was provided for
students as a link through their Blackboard website. No identifying information was acquired by this study, and students were given ample time to consider the questions. Seven of the questions used Leichardt scales to determine the level of freedom students experienced in the course. For those who chose to participate those questions had to be completed. The last question was open-ended, allowing students to provide their own insights and thoughts on the topic.

Analysis and Results:

Of 46 possible participants 35 took the survey. Of those 35, 27 chose to leave the last question blank, while 8 offered targeted commentary. Of the first four questions more than 50% of the respondents felt they had a lot of freedom when it came to structure, topics, and in GSW overall. Freedom to employ imagery results, however, were markedly different, favoring some or even no freedom. As results of the fifth question it is clear that students feel in general that they are encouraged, often strongly, to be creative. And lastly students felt creativity to be important and expected assessment of their papers to reflect that expectation.

Discussion

As a result of this survey, one can extract some of the strengths and weaknesses of my course. First, my attempts to develop freedom of structure and topic and to encourage an overall experience of freedom are, for the most part, working out well. I clearly, however, do not present imagery as an important part of a traditional essay, and I wonder if as a result of having taken this survey a student or two might include an image in his or her next paper. Second, I was surprised that student expectations and expression of value about creativity lined up almost exactly with their expectations for assessment. On further reflection, who wouldn’t want what
one values to be a determining factor in one’s evaluation? It also makes me wonder if the respondents who said it wouldn’t matter took GSW before. If I were asked to rank it myself, I’d rank it rather low. A paper in GSW passes based on whether it meets specific criteria not on its creative qualities, but my focus in my feedback to my students up to the point of administering this survey has been more on style, tone, and success of their arguments (the last of which is certainly an essential part of the GSW formula). Lastly, this survey makes me wonder how much of a gap there is in perception of what kinds of writing there are and what creativity within writing means. After years of studying writing, I have a vision of creativity and freedom that I think is very different from that of my students. Obviously in an environment where their writing will be judged (with potential consequences), students are not likely to act freely, but I wonder if there might be ways to trick the system, to get them to be adventurous and yet in the end still meet the university imposed expectations. It feels like a nervous but potentially worthwhile gamble.

Survey Questions

1. On a scale of 1 to 5 how would rate the variance in topic options for GSW 1110 with 1 being little to no freedom of choice and 5 being complete freedom?

2. On a scale of 1 to 5 how would rate the freedom to develop your own organizational structure for your papers in GSW 1110 with 1 being little to no freedom of choice and 5 being complete freedom?

3. On a scale of 1 to 5 how would rate the freedom to use images in GSW 1110 papers with 1 being little to no freedom of choice and 5 being complete freedom?
4. On a scale of 1 to 5 how would you rate your degree of freedom as a writer in GSW 1110 overall with 1 being little to no freedom of choice and 5 being complete freedom?

5. On a scale of 1 to 5 how would you rate the level of encouragement to write creatively in GSW 1110 with 1 being little to no encouragement and 5 being encouragement all the time?

6. Do you think creativity in your writing will impact the assessment of your papers in GSW 1110?

7. Do you personally value creativity in your writing?

8. In the section below you may offer any comments, feelings, or provide feedback about creativity and writing freedom in GSW 1110. You may leave this box blank.

Data Representation

| Creativity in GSW 1110: Questions 1-4 |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                               | Topics           | Structure        | Imagery          | Overall          |
| No Choice                    | 0                | 0                | 8                | 0                |
| Little Freedom               | 3                | 5                | 8                | 3                |
| Some Freedom                 | 5                | 7                | 14               | 7                |
| A lot of Freedom             | 22               | 17               | 4                | 19               |
| Complete Freedom             | 4                | 6                | 1                | 6                |
Student Comments (verbatim)

i think we have freedom, but when it comes to choosing a topic, it gets very restricted because so many topics become "unarguable"

I am really frustrated with this course. I hate the structure and I think we are being turned into robots. I understand the university has to make this course fair and effective for every student and that is why the structure is the way it is. However, while I do not have a recommendation, that is not my job, and I do not think this course is teaching students how to write in the real world. We do have some freedom to write about what we want but usually within a topic that may be difficult for some.

I honestly think we have a good amount of freedom. We are basically confined to a topic but that's the only restrictions that we really have, and as long as we have all the elements of our essays we are free to write them as we choose.

Though we have only written three essays thus far, I feel as though we have had very little freedom with the content. It is clear that we chose our own topics, however one can't necessarily choose a topic they particularly care to argue for. I understand the importance of an argument paper but the creativity level is still very low... Thus far anyway.

I like being aloud to pick my own topic because it is different from what i did in high school. Also i like having more freedoms with my writing instead of going straight from a book and having it exactly the way the book or teacher says to.

Honestly, this is the best writing course i've ever had. I thought i would hate it, but it's really one of the few classes i enjoy coming to in the mornings. It's also the most fun i've had writing papers, and you're very helpful! Thanks!