INTRODUCTION: MENTORING AS “INVISIBLE” WRITING INSTRUCTION

Although there is a strong tradition in composition studies of Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID), much of the focus has been on undergraduate writing; research into effective writing support for post/graduate students across disciplines often falls under the study of English for Academic Purposes. For post/graduate students reporting on their research, formal writing instruction is often not addressed programmatically; instead, students may work with advisors (in some contexts known as “supervisors”), learn informally through trial and error, or seek help from a writing centre or university writing course.

Research on the writing of post/graduate students in the disciplines has concentrated on descriptive, in-depth case studies of post/graduate courses and writers (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Blakeslee, 1997; Prior, 1998), efforts of disciplinary professors to emphasise and improve writing within the context of content-area coursework (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Hudnall, 2003; Nolan & Rocco, 2009), the development of post/graduate writing courses by compositionists (Johns & Swales, 2002; Micciche & Carr, 2011; Rose & McClafferty, 2001), and the unique writing needs of second-language post/graduate students (Belcher, 1994; Jordan & Kedrowicz, 2011). Yet for those post/graduate students who do not enrol in a writing course or a course within their post/graduate programme that includes overt writing instruction, it can be assumed that their primary source of writing instruction may be their thesis or dissertation advisor’s feedback and suggestions through informal meetings and document review, activities that have received little attention from composition scholars. This type of informal writing instruction is less visible both within and outside disciplinary contexts. Mentoring thus might be thought of as an “invisible” form of writing instruction, in that others outside the mentoring dyad—colleagues, department chairs, writing experts on campus—are unaware of the writing pedagogies being employed. While there is some literature on mentoring of
post/graduate students in various disciplines (Kirkley, 1999; Mackin, Macera, & Jennings, 2006), it does not address mentoring specifically focused on writing skills.

In Science, Math, and Engineering fields, students have been found to be given fewer writing assignments as part of their coursework (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Hale et al., 1996; Horowitz, 1986); yet such students are nevertheless expected later to compose theses and dissertations, and to publish research manuscripts. Although there is substantial literature on responding to undergraduate scientific writing, there is a lack of research on the approaches faculty across scientific disciplines employ in addressing post/graduate writing and offering feedback on texts. Recent studies focus on post/graduate students’ responses to faculty or writing consultants’ advice (Chen, 2010; Sharmini & Kumar, 2011), rather than on faculty perspectives on writing mentoring. This paucity prompts questions about advisors’ writing mentoring, specifically within scientific fields in which students often work closely with advisors who are primary investigators: what experiences and resources do professors draw upon as they provide informal instruction in disciplinary writing literacies? Is writing mentoring a process that must be modelled? What kinds of strategies do faculty employ to assist individual students in successfully composing academic and professional texts?

Advisors’ perspectives on their writing mentoring experiences and practices can help shed light on the kinds of often outwardly invisible informal writing instruction that take place in scientific disciplines. As compositionists work with post/graduate writers in our own courses and writing centres, as well as with professors in faculty workshops, it can be helpful to draw on such knowledge of disciplinary writing practices. It is also instructive to learn how advisors’ beliefs about writing inform their mentoring. This chapter reports the results of a qualitative study of informal writing mentoring in the sciences. The manuscript will present the results of interviews conducted with professors in scientific disciplines at a large research university in the Western United States.

**Interview Methodology**

A qualitative case study approach was employed to investigate advisors’ perspectives on post/graduate writing mentoring. In Fall of 2012 I interviewed eight professors in the sciences, including one faculty member each in the departments of Biology, Biomedical Informatics, Geography, Occupational Therapy, Pharmaceutical Chemistry, and Social Work, and two faculty members in Nursing. Four are male, four female. All interviewees but two were tenured, and all