CHAPTER 15.

METAPHORS OF WRITING AND INTERSECTIONS WITH JAMAICAN MALE IDENTITY

Carmeneta Jones and Vivette Milson-Whyte
The University of the West Indies, Jamaica

Over the years, Jamaican male students' achievement in different intellectual activities has been on the decline.[1] Research findings tend to highlight this recurring theme (Bailey, 2003; Bryan & Shaw, 2002; Chevannes, 1999; Evans, 1999; Evans 2001; Miller, 1991), with issues related to Jamaican male students' use of oral and written English in formal settings being an ongoing concern.[28] In her work on gender sensitive education in Jamaica, Bailey (2003) demonstrated that attesting to the problem are the results of local examinations such as the Grade Four Literacy Test and Grade Six Achievement Test for primary school students and the results in the regional Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC). In fact, making reference to the results of the Grade 6 Communication Task (a written examination) results in 1999 and 2000, the Test Unit at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture [MOEYC] revealed that the national average percent mark for each year was 60 and 43.25 for females, and 58.75 and 47 for males, respectively. A comparison of these results for the two years for males and females reveals a downward trend in the grade six students' performance in writing. A similar trend was also noted by the MOEYC (2001) for the CSEC English Language results for the year 2000. Of the 16, 830 females and 9, 647 males who sat the exam, 8,221 females and 3,490 males were successful. This means that the overall percentage was 44 and the pass rates for males and females were less than 50%—boys' being 36%.

The dismal results of the Grade 6 Communication Task and the CSEC English language examinations taken by Jamaican students became push factors for the Ministry of Education, the main stakeholder of the country's education system. It responded to the issue by formulating a language policy in which it was noted that, "The unsatisfactory performance of students in language and literacy at all levels of the Jamaican education system, and its accompanying effects on language competence … the potential for human

development in the wider society have potentially been matters of concern" (MOEYC, 2001, para. 1).

Moreover, the poor performance has implications for those students who intend to study at the tertiary level, especially for those who wish to be accepted at the university where the research took place. As in other places such as Nigeria (Fakeye & Ogunsiji, 2009) where English is the language of academe, in Jamaica, English proficiency is a strong predictor and determinant of academic achievement for males and females. Indeed, English is one of the subjects students are required to pass to gain entry to university (Dyche, 1996). Furthermore, having entered university, despite their gender and specified areas of study, all students are expected to demonstrate competence in written communication.

Research and observation suggest that males experience challenges at the university level. Bailey (2003) found that at the higher education level in Jamaica, it has become apparent that males' achievement in literacy-oriented tasks is declining. Bailey also reported that Jamaican males are less represented in tertiary level education and that their academic achievement is lower than that of their female counterparts. As teachers and coordinators in a compulsory university writing course, we observed male students' under-participation and underachievement, with the statistical data from the results of writing courses seeming to accentuate the time-driven issue. For example, in the second semester of the school year 2009-2010, of the 691 students who registered to take a first-year writing course we teach in introduction to academic writing, only 194 (28%) were males. Of the 194 males, 186 (95%) actually started the course and of this number, 55 (30%) were not successful. A reader may say that 30% is not significant; however, their final marks ranged from 27% to 38%. Additionally, a significant percentage of the males scored low grades ranging from a bare pass of 40 to 48.

It can be extrapolated from the research findings and observations in the Jamaican context that one issue concerning the island's males is underachievement in writing (Bailey, 2003; Bryan & Shaw, 2002; Chevannes, 1999; Evans, 1999; Evans 2001; Figueroa, 2000; Miller, 1991; Moey, C., 2001; Parry, 2000). Indeed, writing—considered the "quintessential representation of thought" (Brand, 1987, p. 436) and the principal way in which scholarship is demonstrated—seems to be the most challenging task for some Jamaican males. In response to this problem, researchers have tried to determine the various factors which contribute to the difficulties males experience when they are required to write. The research tells us that the problem may be related to how boys are socialized (Bailey & Brown, 1999; Chevannes, 1999; Figueroa, 2000), to boys' fear of and dislike for writing and the misconception that it is a feminine

activity (Jones, 2009), to the eventual marginalization of males (Miller, 1991), to teachers' preferential treatment of boys and girls, teaching methodology and students' interest (Evans, 1999) or to lack of models (Bryan, 2010).

It is clear that, for Jamaica, the issues are multi-layered. However, this problem is not peculiar to Jamaica, given the well-established tradition of research into gender and written literacy elsewhere (Bleach, 1998; Cole, 1997; Graves, 1973; Millard, 1997; Newkirk, 2000; Slavkin; 2001). Some of these researchers have explained the differences in performance based on differences in gender (Slavkin, 2001) and on males and females being "differently literate" (Millard, 1997). Others, such as Newkirk have attempted to explain the "gap in performance" based on male students' perception of "school defined literacy as excluding—or even dismissing—their own narrative preferences" leading them to "conclude early on that proficiency in school-based writing is more 'natural' for girls" (p. 295).

Ultimately, what the statistics and studies from Jamaica and elsewhere did not help us to understand was what accounted for the writing problems male students contend with *in the university setting*—specifically in the courses we teach. In our search, we were not able to locate research that focused on Jamaican male university students' writing. Admittedly, research done by Milson-Whyte (2008a, 2008b) addressed writing instruction for Jamaican university students, but this was not gender-specific. And Bailey's (2003) work did not focus specifically on writing or provide reasons for male university students' underachievement. We therefore remained concerned about males' under-participation and achievement in writing. Based on the mind-boggling issue and the dearth of research, we designed a study to provide a channel through which a selected group of Jamaican male university students from various disciplines could share their perspectives on writing prior to, during, and after their completion of one first-year writing course which introduced them to academic writing requirements.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

WRITING FROM DIFFERENT LENSES

There is no doubt that writing is an important part of university studies (Bazerman, 2007; Hayes, 1996; Haynes, 1996; Kalikokha, 2008; Lavelle & Zuercher, 2001). Writing, like many tasks, entails a step-by-step developmental process (Hayes, 2000; Graves, 1994). For Elbow (1998), this process is dual in that "… writing calls on the ability to create words and ideas out of yourself, but

it also calls on the ability to criticize them in order to decide which one to use" (p. 7). Cramer (2001) suggested that writing stimulates one's thought processes. He explained that, "Five characteristics of writing influence thinking. Writing is visible, permanent, active, precise and focusing" (p. 3). It can be deduced from these characteristics that writing requires engagement of the *self: the emotional self, the intellectual self, the critical self*—and these *selves* are linked to identity.

THEORIES OF IDENTITY

To understand male university students as writers, we considered male identities. Making reference to research done on social identity theory in psychology, sociology and communication, Ting-Toomey (1999) stated that "individuals bring their sense of 'self-image' or 'identity' to any type of communicative encounter" (p. 26). She further explained that self-image refers to how people view themselves and that this *self-view* has a strong bearing on "cultural, personal, situational and relational factors" (p. 26). She classified these factors as primary identities and situational identities. These identities which can be viewed through cultural, ethnic, gender, and personal lenses are integral to the construction of the self and the socialization process.

Situational identities which change according to factors such as context, purpose and needs, comprise role identity, relational identity, face work identity and symbolic interactional identity (Ting-Toomey, 1999). It can be deduced that all learners, including male university students are multifaceted, and, ideally, this should be considered in the design and delivery of instructional programmes, including writing courses. However, as noted by Moje and Dillon (2000), research done on aspects of classroom life has not sufficiently represented learners' multiple selves/identities.

Jamaican males' performance in literacy-based subjects such as writing may be linked to gender/identity issues. Figueroa (2000) attested to this when he suggested that when Jamaican males excel in these subjects it may be viewed as gender inappropriateness but he reasoned that this is a stereotype. Jones (2009) also reported that male students who participated in a year-long literacy study perceived writing as a feminine task. Also, there are certain aspects of the socialization process in Jamaica which embrace the idea of *tying the heifer and loosing the bull*. Chevannes (1999) suggested that in some instances, Jamaican males are socialized in the street where they assume control over their lives, including the privilege to choose the activities in which they engage. In this context these Jamaican males pass on knowledge to each other using their own language and preferred mode and style of communication—oral language—*man talk*—governed by rules, values, and meanings which they conceptualize.

While problems related to writing may be considered from a group perspective, individual experiences are also revealing. Wong and Rochlen (2009) make the point that other researchers, including Addis and Mahalik, think that there is the need for "… a shift in research focus from gender differences to within group differences among men" (p. 149). This provocative thought inspired us to search for *below the surface* and *beyond the statistics* answers. Encouraged by works done by Jensen (2006), Levin and Wagner (2006), and Willox, Harper, Bridger, Morton, Orbach and Sarapura (2010), we thought that one way of accomplishing this was to ask the participants to use metaphors to express their writing realities.

Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) highlighted that metaphors help us to express ideas that literal words do not convey. These scholars proposed metaphors as mappings of knowledge from one conceptual domain to another. They point out that knowledge about one aspect/domain of a metaphorical mapping can help us to understand a less familiar second domain. This is because "[m]appings are not arbitrary, but grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge" (Lakoff, 1993, p. 245).

Importantly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) asserted that in allowing users to map one area of experience in terms of another that is more complex in order to enable us to understand the latter, metaphors help to convey users' experiences and how they think about those experiences. In other words, in conveying people's conceptual realities, metaphors can indicate users' attitudes to their descriptions and suggest reasons for behavior. In doing metaphor analysis, one tries to identify users' attitudes portrayed in the images by analyzing the tenor (the subject) or the vehicle (the frame or lens). In such analyses, the frequency or intensity of tenors and vehicles provides clues about users' perspectives. In our study, writing was the tenor and the vehicle was the image each participant used to describe writing/experiences.

Unlike Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who focused on how metaphors work, Sheehan (1999) argued that metaphors "serve as a basis for inventing narratives" (p. 48) because the meanings of metaphors are "as much the creation of their interpreters as their authors" (p. 47). For him "metaphors are used to urge us toward further and further invention of meaning as we play with the unexpected connectives to which metaphors draw our attention" (p. 54, emphasis in the original). The narratives that emerged from the students' images of writing provided one way of garnering specific insights into their experiences with this intellectual activity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research was guided by the following questions:
- What were the male university students' perceptions of writing prior to, during, and after taking their first-year writing course?
- In what ways do the participants' metaphors of writing intersect with their personal and situational identities?
- How can an understanding of the participants' metaphors of writing inform future practice?

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The 13-week semester-long study focused on a group of university male students' perceptions of writing. We used a phenomenological approach which "seeks to disclose and elucidate the phenomena of behaviour as they manifest themselves in their perceived immediacy" (van Kaam, as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). From the outset, we wanted to, as Purcell-Gates (2004) proposed, "understand the world from the participants' perspectives" (p. 96): we wanted to get a sense of what these male university students believed about writing in terms of its role and function in their lives and tertiary level studies. A phenomenological approach helped us "to pay … attention to qualitative aspects" (Taylor, 2011, p. 1) of the participants' lived reality with writing and what that reality meant to them.

Setting

The study took place at an urban, public, research-based university situated in eastern Jamaica. It offers pre-university, certificate, diploma, undergraduate, and graduate degree programmes to local, Caribbean, and international students from various socio-economic backgrounds. The university's policy stipulates that, ideally, all first-year students should take a first-year writing course.

The enrolment for the school year when the study took place (2009-2010), was 15,516 students. Of that total, 11,882 were undergraduates and 3,634 were enrolled in graduate programmes. The number of admitted first degree entrants who took first year courses was 3,684. Females account for the majority of the predominantly young student population at the university; 57% of the students in 2009-2010 were 24 years and under. Table 1 shows the population's distribution in terms of age.

Table 1. Age distribution in 2009-2010

Age	2009
Under 20	19%
20-24	38%
25-34	25%
35-49	14%
50 +	4%
Total	100%

PARTICIPANTS

All of the male students who were taught a course in academic writing by the co-researchers during the second semester of the school year 2009-2010 were invited to participate in the study. In the end, eight (8) participants whose age range was 17 to 25 years participated in the study. Five were from the Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences, two from the Faculty of Social Sciences, and one straddled Pure and Applied Sciences and Education. Principles regarding the confidentiality of participants' responses were adhered to. Table 2 shows each participant's assigned name, discipline, and GPA obtained for the semester when the study was conducted.

Table 2. Participants' profiles

Participant	Major/Programme	GPA
Mr. Vision	Anthropology	2.20
Mr. Explorer	Psychology	1.50
Mr. Dual	Chemistry with Education	2.89
Mr. Work in Progress	Chemistry	3.23
Mr. See What I See	Alternative Energy and General Chemistry	3.23
Mr. Serenade	Mathematics/Computer Science	0.43
Mr. Amphibian	Occupational/Environmental Safety and Health	1.71
Mr. Reader-Writer	Food Chemistry	1.00

DATA COLLECTION

A variety of sources was used for the data collection. Initially, personal data were garnered when each participant completed a questionnaire called Participants' Information Preview (PIP). This source has been used successfully in

Jamaican-based research which focused on males' literacy education (Henry, 2010; Jones, 2009; Solomon, 2010). In our study participants provided data on their disciplines, emotions they associate with writing, and how they perceived writing in general and in relation to their studies prior to their engagement in a first-year writing course. Some of the questions were:

- When you think of writing or when you have to engage in a writing exercise, what kind of emotion(s) do you experience? Please explain.
- What role (s) do you believe that writing plays in the successful pursuit of your degree?
- What role does writing play in other aspects of your life?

The participants also wrote weekly reflections in which they commented on their writing experiences during the course. Some of the prompts were:

- Write down what you thought about academic writing prior to starting [the course].
- Write down what you thought you were going to do in the course regarding academic writing. /What were your expectations?
- Write down your thoughts about what you are learning or unlearning about academic writing.

Data were also gathered from individual interviews and a joint hour-long conversation/group discussion. In the interviews participants elaborated on information presented in the PIP or commented on information in their reflections. In the conversation, participants reflected on their experiences in learning about academic writing. The interviews and conversation were audio taped. It was in the conversation that participants formulated and shared their metaphors about writing. During the semester, the researchers also observed the participants in and out of classes and took anecdotal notes (see Table 3 for the timeline for data collection).

Table 3. Timeline for data collection

Data source	Date	Duration
PIP	February 2010	N/A
Interviews	March 2010	20-30 mins
Reflections	February-April 2010	N/A
Conversation	April 2010	1 hour

Data Analysis

Analyses of the participants' perceptions were done on a gradual basis, and were guided by work done by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Sheehan (1999).

We began this process by cross checking and interpreting information from the PIP, reflections, and audio tapes. We also met on a weekly basis to discuss what we observed in our classroom interactions with the participants and the patterns and themes which emerged from the data. In the final stages of our analyses, as we identified connections between the students' identities and their vivid descriptions of their writing experiences, the narratives surrounding each participant's metaphor of writing provided clues about the participants' varied relationships with writing and connections to their individual identities. In extrapolating meaning from the participants' perspectives, like Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we were able to discover that metaphors are multidimensional and that they can be used as tools to critically analyze human experiences—including students' individual experiences with writing.

FINDINGS

Participants' Views about Writing Prior to Taking the Course

Prior to taking their course in writing for academic purposes, the participants shared their views about writing in the PIP and expanded on these views during interviews. The following are summaries of the sentiments they expressed about writing.

- Writing is an enabler for a university degree and communicative competence (Mr. Vision)

- The writing of English, though challenging, allows you to communicate locally and internationally (Mr. Explorer).

- Manipulating objects is preferable to writing (Mr. Dual).

- Starting to write is difficult; writing is not like tackling a mathematical task (Mr. Work in Progress).

- The thought of writing produces anxiety because of ignorance about what to write and the feeling of violation experienced after completing a writing task (Mr. See What I See).

- Experiences with writing change over time. It is difficult

to write outside of a comfort zone (Mr. Serenade).

- Although writing well is the key to success, it is difficult to do it and do it well. Writing is associated with pressure (Mr. Amphibian).

- Writing is a bitter/sweet experience (Mr. Reader-Writer).

Mr. Reader-Writer's description of writing as *bitter-sweet* seems to encapsulate the perceptions of the others. In numerous ways, these findings mirror the thoughts postulated by Cramer (2001) and Elbow (1998) as well as other experts that writing is a demanding cognitive task.

Prior to taking the course, the male students also declared their preferred genres of writing, and these and the emotions they experience when they are required to write are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Participants' preferred mode of writing and emotions they feel when they write

Participant	Preferred mode of writing	Emotion(s)
Mr. Vision	Persuasion	Elation
Mr. Explorer	Persuasion	Ease
Mr. Dual	Exposition	Excitement/Frustration
Mr. Work in Progress	Exposition	No Enthusiasm
Mr. Reflector	Not sure	Anxiety
Mr. Serenade	Argument	Stress
Mr. Amphibian	Persuasion	Frustration
Mr. Reader-Writer	Narration	Dejection

The different responses are reminders that these male university students, like all human beings, are complex (Ting-Toomey, 1999) because they are unique and have different preferences and idiosyncrasies and that their emotional responses to situations and circumstances are dissimilar. The male students also shared other views about writing prior to taking their writing course. Some of these views were positive while others were negative.

Participants' Reflections on Writing During the Research Process

Findings from the participants' weekly reflections on their writing experiences during the research process are presented in the following summaries:

- Over time one can develop a positive attitude to academic writing and the writing process (Mr. Vision).

- Writing requires practice and is important for success at school and work, but it is difficult if one does not like to read (Mr. Explorer).

- Writing is a means of recording and sharing ideas. (Mr. Dual).

- Writing is a strong determinant of success (Mr. Work in Progress)

- Writing, which is linked to critical reading, is important to university education (Mr. Reflector).

- University writing is more discipline specific; it is different from that which is done in high school (Mr. Serenade).

- Writing and critical thinking are inextricably connected (Mr. Amphibian).

- Writing, like reading, is about problem solving (Mr. Reader-Writer).

These sentiments show that, as the semester progressed, the participants acknowledged the importance of writing—whether it demanded critical thinking or extensive research or prepared them for jobs, or whether they viewed it as a means of sharing knowledge and discoveries or solving problems, among others.

STUDENTS' VIEWS OF WRITING AFTER TAKING THE COURSE

After taking the course in academic writing and lauding its benefits in terms of fostering their holistic development, the participants used metaphors to describe writing in ways which seemed consistent with their perceptions of it prior to the course. A metaphorical image provides a vivid picture of participants' individual and collective, *real* realities as expressed in the conversation at the end of the study (see Figure 1).
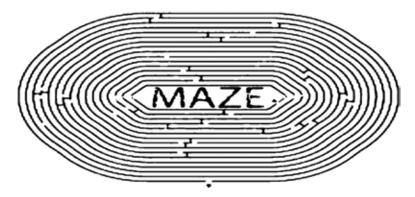

Figure 1. Image of the participants' writing realities at the university

This graphic representation is explained in a more detailed manner in the following vignette which is a composite of findings from the focus group discussion:

> The group of first year male students attending a Jamaican university desired to arrive at Success in Academic Writing. They soon discovered that they were in a maze—a complicated set of paths, of situations and ideas, of pre-formulated requirements, rudiments, and conventions that would challenge their long-established cultural practice of controlling and practicing their style of communication (liberal man talk). This context was the opposite of their main "socializing site, the street, their comfort zone … a male domain" (Chevannes, 1999, p. 4). In order to arrive at their final destination, these male students had to figure the best way out of the maze. Table 5 shows the participants' metaphors and additional perspectives on writing.

Table 5. Participants' metaphors of, and additional perspectives on, writing

Participant	Metaphor of writing	Additional Perspectives (s)
Mr. Vision	Journey	The writing process is a never ending journey with only room for improvement.
Mr. Explorer	A walk in the park	I don't think you can go throughout the rest of your life … without writing a proper essay … whether for a job application or further down the line.
Mr. Dual	Double-edged sword	I think writing is basically the means by which humans become immortals. … It's important now and it's going to be very important … in the future.
Mr. Work in Progress	Imperfect man	Improving in writing may even lead to improvements as an individual
Mr. Reflector	Mirror	I've come a long way … getting over my own inhibitions to writing.
Mr. Serenade	Singing	I'm seeing an improvement where my geography essay is concerned because I'm a little better equipped in terms of structuring my stuff and the whole citation thing.
Mr. Amphibian	Swimming through rough waters	I still don't have a good vibes when it comes to writing but the thought of doing it in Patois really interest me
Mr. Reader-Writer	----	--- (missed conversation)

DISCUSSION

The participants' images of writing suggest that these male students perceive writing as a complex task which causes them to experience different feelings ranging from some struggling for survival amidst the challenges and trepidation they face with writing in the academy to pleasurable encounters they enjoy when they successfully engage in the different stages of the writing process. The metaphors that the participants used to describe writing and their experiences with writing reflect a complex layering of the male students' realities, desire to control their worlds, and transformative experiences with writing.

Although the participants' metaphors are different, it is apparent that in terms of their writing realities, the male university students had something in common. Using the words of Ivanic (1998), these male students were appren-

tices in the academic writing class. They were in the midst of transitioning from their known territories to the unknown; from their personal/cultural identities to situational identities (Ting-Toomey, 1999). They were at the intersection of different worlds (Murphy, 2002). With new and unfamiliar contours to navigate in the writing class, these male university students had to learn new dynamics and figure strategies to succeed. These Jamaican male university students strongly made the point that although writing poses a variety of challenges for them, it is one of a number of tools that they all need to figure their way out of the *academic maze.* Whether participants began with a love for writing and confidence in their ability to write as Mr. Pathfinder did or preferred to pursue studies that require them to apply mostly numeracy-mathematical and scientific ideas and formulae as did Mr. Dual and Mr. Work in Progress, they grew to believe that this skill is vital to success in the academy.

Indeed, since like their female counterparts they are expected to write English for academic and other purposes, males need to transform their power to talk into proficiency in writing in the structured classroom setting. Although Jamaican males seem to be more comfortable in familiar settings which are driven by orality—the power, economy and buoyancy of the spoken word, the participants realized that their ability to adapt could aid their communicative competencies. When male students have developed the art of adaptability, they should be equipped to transform their way of thinking.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As the Jamaican male students tried to reposition themselves, they were charting a course for self-transformation. Their perceptions of writing indicate a) a need to critically analyze Jamaican male students' desire to conquer and control writing in order to excel in it, b) that students' metaphors profoundly distinguish their identities as well as their views of writing, and c) that students' reflections on writing can be self-transforming. With regard to the latter, the implication of this study is that change in the way of thinking should begin with the selves of the university male students. It is incumbent on male students to accept their realities concerning writing and develop the will and the right attitude to transform those realities in such a way that they are empowered. In this age, when versatility gives university students the competitive edge, male students should transcend cultural and discipline-specific boundaries as well as interrogate and reconstruct any belief, practice, or custom which emphasizes the ideas that writing is an effeminate activity.

The findings also indicate the need for transformation in relation to instructional practices including task-type. They confirm assertions made by local researchers that some Jamaican males may wrestle with written literacy development because of the conventional and traditional modes of delivery (Chevannes, 1999; Evans 1999, 2001; Jones, 2009). The metaphors used by the participants suggest that educators need to evaluate male students' desire to conquer and dominate what they need to master for success.

Since, prior to this study, local related works focused on a mixture of Jamaican male and female students or on quantitative measures, this study, though limited in terms of time and participants, achieved its purpose of discovering insights about the qualitative aspects of the male students' writing experiences. There is no doubt that investigation of a greater magnitude, done over a longer period, would have yielded more comprehensive findings. However, considering the paucity of research on such an important educational issue, this study may be viewed as a step in the right direction to get the within group perceptions as suggested by Addis and Mahalik (as cited in Wong & Rochlen, 2009).

Finally, since the study suggests that students' metaphors of writing can provide facilitators of university writing courses with deep understanding of the multiple realities/selves which male students bring to the classroom, university educators, particularly those who teach writing, could consider combining metaphor analysis with other analytic procedures to discover more about the underlying factors which contribute to the difficulties which some male students face with writing and to help those students transition to university level writing and experience writing's transformative potential.

NOTE

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