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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a freshman composition course at a community college which was taught by television and which included thirty 30-minute tapes and an accompanying study guide. Entitled "Writing for a Reason," the primary objective of the course was to help students write effectively so they will be able to fulfill their writing requirements in college and elsewhere. The 30 lessons included a preview of the course; prewriting concerns, especially audience and persona; five lessons on the paragraph; three lessons on the essay; two lessons on diction; nine lessons on specific reasons for writing; and one lesson each on the persuasive essay, the history of the English language, dictionary use, library use, and style. The students were divided into sections of 30 to 40 people, and a writing consultant was assigned to each section. The writing consultants were qualified English teachers who made comments on the students' individual writing and suggested supplementary work. Testing was done on campus but writing assignments were mailed in to the consultant.
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Writing for a Reason: A Telecourse in
Freshman Composition

Dee Brock

Can freshman composition be taught successfully via television? Last spring as the Dallas Community College District went into production the most frequent response to that question was a resounding "no!" Apparently the English instructors in the District wanted to see television offerings expanded; many of them were interested in teaching television courses themselves. But no one wanted that course to be composition.

I was inclined to agree with the major objections. But I was also committed to give the course a try. The opportunity to use television for constructive purposes, the chance to contribute to a viable alternative educational style, the challenge of trying to translate rhetorical principles into a visually exciting format all added up to an offer I couldn't refuse. On January 15, 1974, I started working on a course design; on September 8, 1974, with the help of dozens of others, the course began. About 1400 students enrolled Fall, 1974: 850 in Dallas County Community Colleges and the rest in other community colleges in our viewing area. Called Writing for a Reason, the course includes thirty, thirty minute tapes and an accompanying Study Guide.

As the title implies, the course has a pragmatic base. Students enrolled in other television courses in our district last year were, as a whole, older students--the biggest block of them in their thirties. Most of them were employed; most wanted to graduate from college; most wanted additional education in order to earn a

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raise or a promotion or a different job altogether. Thus, a practical course teaching students how to handle the real writing problems they were likely to meet in other college courses and in job situations seemed most likely to meet the needs of most students.

The main goal of Writing for a Reason, then, is that the student learn to write so effectively that he can fulfill his reasons for writing in college and elsewhere. Consequently, the course covers basic writing skills, such as choosing and shaping a thesis; planning a composition; and composing unified, complete, orderly, and coherent sentences, paragraphs, and essays. Because good writing begins with good thinking, the course gives attention to straight thinking and logic. Because language is the basic medium for all writing, the course covers the high points about the way language functions historically, socially and psychologically. Mechanics, usage, and grammar are not a part of either the telelessons or the Study Guide, but the student receives individual help from his writing consultant about his own special problems and needs. Other goals involve the student's knowing himself better, experiencing his environment more fully, and appreciating his language as a flexible process over which he can have control and through which he can, at least in part, control his world.

The thirty lessons include "The Beginning," a preview of the course; "Language Options," an attempt to deal with "that question"-- the student's right to his own language; "The Nature of Communication"; "Readiness," prewriting concerns, especially audience and persona. There are five lessons on the paragraph--a general view, and a lesson each on unity, order, completeness, and coherence--and three on

the essay as a whole--one lesson on the essay in general, one on introductions, and one on conclusions and transitional paragraphs. Two lessons concentrate on diction; two concentrate on sentences. Nine lessons deal with specific reasons for writing: the paper of definition; the paper of comparison; the paper of classification; the paper of analysis; the letter of application; the essay test; the report; the persuasive essay; and the evaluative essay. Bravely, one lesson covers the history of the English language, and another two cover epistemology, logic and fallacious reasoning. Naturally, there is a lesson on the dictionary, and using the library is part of the lesson on classification. The last lesson is called "Style."

Although this run-down sounds very traditional, even stodgy, the lessons are entertaining. Utilizing the television media, they involve actors, music, celebrities, cartoons, pantomimes, art, and real people with real reasons for writing. Let me show you Lesson I as an example. (Show 30 minute tape.)

The students in Dallas County enroll as students of one of the four campuses: Eastfield College; El Centro College; Mountain View College; or Richland College. They watch two lessons a week on television. This semester, each lesson airs six times so that the student can almost certainly find a convenient time slot. In case they can't, each of the campus libraries and two of the public libraries have a complete set of cassettes so that the students can see the programs there. These cassettes could make the course a self-paced course--if we had enough video-cassette players; however, there are usually waiting lists for all the machines all the time right now.

Although I am the on-camera teacher on every lesson, the students are all assigned a writing consultant who grades their papers and is available for telephone or personal consultation. The writing consultants are all qualified English teachers. Of the twenty-three currently employed in Dallas County, eight are full time faculty; five are part-time teachers on a three-fifths contract; the other ten are part-time. Still they must meet the same standards as other part-time people hired to teach in the Evening Divisions of the District's colleges. In other words, all have at least a master's degree and some teaching experience.

The students are divided into sections of thirty to forty people. No consultant can take on more than two sections. The mail-in assignments are sent directly to the consultants who make copious comments on the papers, xerox the graded paper, file the copy, mail the original back to the student. Since the consultant spends at least three hours a week on the campus for each section, the student can telephone or drop by if he feels he needs clarification about some of the comments on his papers or if he feels he needs help in understanding the telelessons or in applying what he's learned to his next papers.

There are five ungraded paragraphs to mail in during the first five weeks of the course. On these papers the consultants make as many helpful comments as they can about the student's writing and suggest supplementary work and books and help in the colleges' learning centers or developmental writing labs. At the end of the fifth week, the students take their first test on campus. That test becomes their first letter grade. There are two other tests, one at the end of the tenth week and one at the end of the

fifteenth. The students must go to campus to take their tests. Each campus has set up a special test center which operates Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for all television courses. The students can come at any time during the weekend, and they can take as long as they need to finish. Each English test includes essay questions. ID cards are required to help control the security problem. The student writes seven full length graded essays during the last two-thirds of the semester. Of these ten grades, he may drop the lowest. Thus, if he misses a test or a paper, that missed grade automatically becomes his lowest grade.

Since several college districts use Writing for a Reason now and since Dallas County Community College District intends to market it nationally, the assignments are not made on the television programs. Instead the assignments are included in the Study Guide. The Study Guide is an important part of the course. It provides an overview, learning objectives, and a series of questions and vocabulary which serve as an outline of each program's content. It also assigns several ungraded exercises and suggests several enrichment activities. There is also a pre-test and post-test, which includes the mail-in assignments. Because the book will be used for several semesters, the due dates for assignments are on a course calendar provided to each student. The calendar also informs the student of optional on-campus discussion meetings, held before each test on each campus, and of times and places for tests.

Are there problems in teaching composition this way? Indeed. For example, placement. We insist that students come to an orientation session. We hold several on each campus. One purpose

of these sessions is to give a diagnostic test and to counsel, on the spot, those who would have difficulty in completing the course successfully. Still, many students do not come to any of the orientation meetings. Few who come and are advised that the chances for success are poor drop the course or transfer to a developmental program. Overall, counseling and placement still need to be improved.

Logistics caused some concern. The sheer mechanics of getting the papers distributed to the consultants, keeping student addresses current, mailing the papers back to the students, keeping the students informed about tests and discussion meetings and assignments and their own progress call for a well-designed system with great attention to details, a system we think we have fairly well under control now.

One crucial problem is choosing the writing consultants, for the course fails or succeeds depending upon their work. Being a consultant calls for the same kind of student-centered educational philosophy that DCCCD campuses practice, but it calls for much more reaching out for individual students than an on-campus course demands. Whereas the classroom teacher can often be disorganized and unpunctual and still be quite effective because his personality, teaching skills, and physical presence make an impact on his students, the good consultant must be quite disciplined; he must keep his office hours strictly, return his phone calls quickly, and grade and remail papers promptly. Being a consultant offers an instructor the opportunity to teach in the kind of one-to-one relationship that most say they want; however, it lacks some of the interpersonal benefits such situations usually afford. The

association is often by mail only; so the consultant must be able to find satisfaction in seeing the student's skills improve without necessarily seeing the student's appreciation of the consultant's help grow. While most consultants want to see their students or at least talk to them on the phone, they must be willing to handle their function via the mail service. Necessarily, then, the consultant must write more extensive comments on the students' papers. Another problem is that the consultant shares his teaching instruction with Dee Brock and her role appears in some respects more authoritative and glamorous to the students than the consultant's. Because they see her for an hour a week, many students come to know Dee Brock better than their consultants; even on the final exam, despite directions to the contrary on all three tests, a few students still listed "Brock" as their instructor.

But the major problem is student participation. The course calls for enormous self-discipline on the part of the student, who must watch the programs, do his work, mail in his assignments by himself. Neither the rewards nor the anxieties of the classroom with peers and instructor spur him on. Twenty-six percent of those who enrolled in the fall semester were never heard from again. They paid their tuition and disappeared; only sixty-five percent of the enrollees took the first test. What happened to these students? We're still trying to find out. Our mail-out survey was quite ineffective. Apparently, if the student didn't want to mail in assignments, he didn't want to mail back a survey either. Telephone surveys were more revealing. Students generally said they hadn't realized how much time the course would take or how little time they would have to give to it. Or they said they had new jobs, new mates,

or personal or family illnesses and/or problems. At any rate, at the end of the first semester, fifty-five percent completed the course with a grade of A, B, C, or D and earned their three hours credit. For most of these students, the television course was a happy experience. Their evaluation of the course (anonymous check list survey given along with the final test) was overwhelmingly favorable.

Well, we're back to the original question: Can freshman composition be taught successfully via television? Now my answer must be "Yes, if ..."

If the students are properly placed.

If the television lessons are well-done.

If the study guide is helpful.

If the consultants are good at their jobs.

If the students stick with it.

Though we haven't mastered all the "ifs" yet, we think we have made a good start with Writing for a Reason.