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ABSTRACT
             Research has suggested that students have difficulty
completing content area writing assignments if the teacher's written
instructions are not clear. Students' written work is more likely to
be of higher quality if teachers specify the assignment's audience
and purpose and offer prewriting instruction. Controversy exists over
how explicit the instructions should be--whether they should contain
an outline of the writing process, or whether this should be implicit
in the assignment--but there is some consensus that instructors
should balance open-endedness with strategic directions or cues in
the instructions. A study of instructors' writing assignments at the
University of Texas at Austin revealed that instructors did offer the
most crucial rhetorical cues, as well as other related ones, in their
writing assignments. A content analysis of the writing assignments of
35 faculty members showed that two rhetorical dimensions, topic and
specific task, appeared most frequently. Almost all of the 130
assignments contained topics, and those that did not were elaborated
upon in class. Less popular were references to style, organization,
purpose, and audience. Two thirds, however, contained imprecise
language and mixed messages. Teachers must remember that student
experiences grow out of instructions, and evaluation of the final
written product is a response to the connection between an assignment
and the product. (Thirty references are included.) (JC)

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Bridging the Communication Gap Between Teacher and Student:

Composing Assignments in the Content Areas

Paper Presented at the 77th Annual

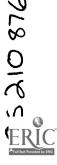National Conference of Teachers of English

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The written texts of assignments have always interested me, because my experience counseling students with writing blocks and problems has given me--and continues to give me--insight into the confusion that arises when students do not understand what their teachers want them to do. Think of times that you yourselves may have wondered why in the world a student was submitting a paper clearly unrelated to the task at hand. Was that wholly the student's fault? Instructors' oral elaborations, though useful and often inspired, may fail unless reinforced by clearly written instructions; since oral elaborations are often misheard or ignored, students rely heavily on written reminders as they begin and pursue writing projects.

Consequently, my talk today is based on the premise that the composition assignment has a relatively big responsibility in writing instruction in the content areas--especially at the college level. Although it is best to let children and other beginning writers choose their own topics and discover organization and purpose as they learn to write, some framework for composition is necessary in instances in which the writing experience is tied directly to a content area and a specific instructional objective. In addition, the content-area instructor may not have as much time as the English teacher to follow students through an assignment, so it is important that the writing assignment elicit the stages of the process necessary for the student to fulfill the instructor's expectations and to learn something.

In the next 20 minutes, I will elaborate on this importance and

delineate the dimensions of composition assignments; to illustrate, I will refer to research which I conducted at the University of Texas at Austin (Mitchell, 1987); finally, I will conclude with a few observations gleaned from comparing practice to theory.

The Importance of Composition Assignments

Articles and research on assignments suggest that since sound writing assignments elicit productive writing activities, the composition of assignments is a task that requires more than the few minutes often accorded writing assignments by teachers who are pressed for time and--how many of us have done this?--thus compose assignments between classes, on the way to school, as we stand at the chalkboard. Beene (1984) and Hillocks (1986) both note that there is a common belief in the symbiotic relationship between an assignment and the writing process. Much of the sentiment is summed up in Kitzhaber's statement that "All teachers of composition should recognize that planning an assignment in writing is one of the most important aspects of teaching composition, and it should accordingly receive their closest attention" (1965, p. 33).

Some empirical research documents the relationship between an assignment and the writing that it elicits. For examples: Hoetker (1982) suggests that a teacher's phrasing and framing of an assignment are important to the writing process. Woodworth and Keech (1980) found that students writing in response to different rhetorical contexts were more likely to write better essays if topics were rhetorically differentiated by audience specifications. Research in general implies that higher writing

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quality will result in essays in response to asignments with prewriting instruction. The relationship between the assignment and the writing experience may be said to lie not soley in rhetorical or instructional dimensions, but in a balancing of different dimensions. I'll say more about these dimensions next.

The Dimensions of Composition Assignments

Although Purves et al. (1984) have made a significant contribution to the anatomy of the writing assignment, popular disagreement on the exact dimensions of a sound assignment may be to blame for the relative neglect of the assignment in the composing process. This disagreement usually centers on the degree to which an assignment should be directive, on how much information should be explicit. There is some concensus, however, that we should balance open-endedness with strategic directions or cues suitable for individual classrooms. These directions constitute the rhetorical dimensions, instructional specifications, and cognitive objectives of an assignment. I have found that certain rhetorical aspects and certain instructional specifications do need to be implicit--not necessarily explicit--and that assignments should be written and clear (Jordan, 1963; Odell, 1980).

How much information should be offered in the assignment? Farley (1982) and Reiff and Middleton (1983)--on the one hand--suggest that the writing process be outlined, while Irmscher (1977)--on the other--asserts that the writing process may be implicit in the assignment if the teacher has trained students beforehand--something content-area

instructors do not always do. Although Stanfill (1978) ties the subject of assignments back to the issue of evaluation and suggests that teachers will get better papers if they make assignments specific, he does not solve the issue of how to define specificity. What emerges from the dialogue on the assignment is the idea that constraints should act as exigencies to spur students on to writing, not as obstacles to creativity.

Four beliefs in particular are associated with the good, or sound, assignment. The first is that assignments need to be put into written form so that students will have a reference to turn to (Lindemann, 1982). Although instructors may offer elaboration in the classroom and in conferences--again, if they have time--students often depend on the written word to remind and to guide them (Mayo, 1976). Clarity is second. If the language of written instructions is precise and enough information is given, students are more likely to write well. Larson (1968), for example, suggests that directive verbs and limited injunctions are useful. In addition to being clear and precise, assignments need to be open-ended (Commission on English, 1965; Tierney and Judy, 1972). There should be enough information to engage students but the constraints, as I said earlier, should not be prohibitive Farrell (1969) advises against assignments that elicit dichotomous answers, fragmentary responses, or undirected speculation, as well as those that ask numerous questions.

Guidelines in the assignments constitute another requirement for the assignment: Experiences should not be too unrelated. Our students will learn more about writing if they repeat or extend experiences in extended assignments (Bartholomae, 1982; Herrington, 1981; Hoffman and Schifsky,

1977; Larson, 1967; and Steinhoff, 1980). Sequencing may arise from a repetition of topics or of rhetorical aims. Or--and this is a more common practice in courses I have looked at in the content areas--one main task may be extended into a number of smaller ones; the term paper may be taught in stages, from initial free writing to proposals and bibliographic studies on to drafts and final products.

Despite the usefulness of these qualities, rhetorical dimensions are most important; since the writing experience arises from the rhetorical situation, this idea is not surprising. For students to carry through assignments, they must know why to write and for whom. Broad topics are not enough to direct them.

The dimension of audience (while open to criticism by those who suggest that it is artificial to have students write to one audience and be graded by another--the teacher) is gaining in popularity as the teacher--often thought to be the audience by default--has begun to be replaced by imaginary or hypothetical audiences. Farley (1982), Macrorie (1976), and Reiff and Middleton (1983) stress that this audience should seem as "real" as possible to the students. Courses in the content areas take advantage of this advice when they have students pursue the kinds of writing tasks associated with the disciplines and professions. Others (Donovan, 1978; Farrell, 1969; Griffin, 1983; Herrington, 1982) also emphasize the need for assignments that give students a sense of audience so they will be able to balance the rest of the rhetorical constraints.

Closely aligned with audience are sense of purpose and occasion, which are associated with the concept of a "real" task as opposed to an

academic exercise. Rhetorical aims grow out of these dimensions. Since students are not always successful at inferring a teacher's intentions, even when topics and tasks are clearly stated, guidelines on aims are helpful (Weiss, 1978). Farley (1982) states, "Although the purpose of the essay . . . might seem readily apparent to the instructor, the students need to hear or see the aim of the assignment so that they can begin consciously to choose their tone, language, and examples to meet that purpose" (p. 99). Because students may initially assume that the purpose of a composition assignment is to fulfill course requirements, assignments need to offer tasks that engage them (Throckmorton, 1980).

Instructional specifications, or "practical considerations," are also components of the assignment. Students need to know date due, page length minimum, and so on in order to meet expectations. More important are specifications on formats and disciplinary conventions (Madigan, 1985) and criteria for grading (Larson, 1968; Throckmorton, 1980; Wiener, 1981). Criteria for grading are particularly important. Will students be graded on content or on writing, or on both? In addition, to make writing experiences learning experiences and to shift emphasis from product to process, Lindemann (1982) suggests that instructors include information on pre-writing in the assignment. Pre-writing instruction is important to the composition assignment in a content-area class in which the teacher does not have time to guide students through conferences.

The final dimension of assignments that I discerned is essential to writing as a way of learning: this is comprised of the cognitive objectives. If assignments are to elicit instructive writing experiences, students need cues

that will allow them to utilize the appropriate skills and mental operations (Farley, 1982; Griffin, 1983; Larson, 1967). Furthermore, teachers can structure tasks that will encourage students to go beyond basic level thinking. We must consider if we want students to stay at the knowledge level as they write, or if we want them to analyze, synthesize, question.

Since restrictive assignments with too much delineation of expectations can confuse or inhibit students, the composition of assignments is a difficult task since we must communicate our expectations and also allow students freedom to explore alternatives for writing and learning. I hope that you will keep this idea, and the dimensions which I just outlined, in mind as I go on to report on my study of assignments.

Assignments in the Content Areas: Research and Example

To begin a study of a writing requirement in the content areas at The University of Texas at Austin, I hypothesized that if sound or purposeful writing assignments are likely to elicit productive writing experiences, then a first step in assessing faculty teaching writing as a substantial component of their courses is to analyze writing assignments and to describe the atmosphere in which the assignments are made. This study was based on faculty attitudes toward teaching writing, writing assignments, and selected graded papers including teacher comments. Since most of the 35 faculty members surveyed worked without the aid of teaching assistants and relied largely on the writing assignment to instruct students--most, for example, because of the large classes, were unable to take advantage of the writing conference and saw students largely upon request and to discuss problems

and failure, not process--this group was representative of a real population of teachers. (An ideal world, we all know, would allow more time for us to put into practice everything we know that is theoretically sound.) As I discuss my research, listen for answers to the following questions:

1) How were writing assignments used?

2) What dimensions comprised the assignments?

3) How was information relayed?

How were writing assignments used?

Since the majority felt that writing is a way of learning, it is not surprising that almost everyone agreed that writing assignments should be directly related to the content of courses: Individuals expressed the idea that writing has a direct topical relationship to course material; helps to elaborate course materials; introduces additional information; applies course work to professional uses; and encourages thinking. To help students to apply the content of their courses, faculty usually took paper topics directly from course material, often requiring students to write about the same information they heard in class and read about. Someone, for example, stated, "I require students to ground their understanding of the social science theory presented in the course with reports." In addition, a few used writing to test students. "[Writing]," one teacher noted, serves as the only communication to me of the student's competence." Most individuals felt that the writing assignments intended to connect learning and writing should include detailed, written instructions to help students to organize their thoughts.

2) What dimensions comprised the assignments?

A content analysis of writing assignments revealed (a) what information was given to students either explicitly or implicitly in written texts. I'll present the general findings in terms of instructors' emphases.

First, rhetorical dimensions: Some of them appeared to be important. Two--topic and specific task--appeared most frequently; almost all of the 130 assignments contained topics; the ten without topics were elaborated upon by two instructors who announced topics in class. The topics were broad enough to encourage individual exploration. Aims and modes were also relatively accessible, though there were assignments for which coders could discern no clear rhetorical purpose.

Less popular were references to style, organization, occasion, and audience. Fewer than half contained information on organization, and fewer than half addressed style. Cues on occasion, which were usually stated explicitly, were in only 23 of the assignments from only a few courses. Assignments in professional training areas and the sciences were more likely than humanities courses to offer rhetorical cues on occasion. While many assignments contained references to three of the four dimensions--topic, audience, task, and aims--which I considered integral to the so-called productive assignment, only twenty assignments out of less than a quarter of the courses sampled contained all of them. Training in or knowledge of writing-across-the- curriculum theory seemed to be related to the inclusion of audience.

Next, instructional specifications and cognitive objectives: One third of the assignments I analyzed did not contain clear information on

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instructional specifications. Most of those assignments that did offer

instructional specifications contained due dates and page length

requirements; few, however, asked for particular formats or encouraged

students to prepare a series of drafts. Most assignments stated what

students were to do something to prepare for writing, whether it was to visit

the library, engage in field work, work in a lab, or review lecture notes.

Criteria for evaluation were implicit in assignments from humanities and

social sciences, explicit in professional training, and either implicit or explicit

in the sciences. Related both to instructional specifications and rhetorical

dimensions, the cognitive objectives for assigning writing were evident in

82% of the assignments and were clearly discipline-related.

3) How was information relayed?

In addition to analyzing the content of the assignments, coders

also assessed the way in which information was relayed. They looked for

sequencing, open-endedness, and precision of language.

Only 22% of the assignments could be considered part of a

pre-planned sequence; of these, only assignments from three instructors

divided one long project up into smaller assignments. The sequential nature

of the rest of the assignments derived more frequently from repetition of

topics within varied assignments asking for different aims, modes, or

audiences. For example, one class in drama education required students to

keep a daily log of activities, reactions to class readings and so on. In

addition, students were to choose an age group they could study through

books, observation, and classroom interaction. Related writing assignments

included reports of research on the targeted age group, along with descriptions of activities, lesson plans, evaluations of activities, essays for school board members, and a final paper synthesizing everything.

Coders felt only 58% of the assignments were open-ended, i.e. gave students freedom to develop distinctively individual compositions within the boundaries of assignments. In the rest, students were more restricted. Since topics were usually broad, the restrictions came usually within the rhetorical dimension of occasion and organization or the instructional specification of format. Restrictions seemed to be there for a purpose. In the case of one science class, for example, students were to follow the traditional procedure and format for reporting field research. A less helpful assignment from a sociology class did not contain cues on audience, aim, or occasion, or even topic; but it did note the specialized format of the assignment in an outline students were to follow.

Language made intentions clear in 66% of the assignments. Sources of imprecise language included terms such as "well-thought-out" and "etc.' Unclear sentences included the following: "What you should aim at is to write an essay illuminating the psychological, social, moral, and existential relationship between the two character-types as well as defining the author's purpose in writing about them." Other times, mixed messages obscured the assignments. Consider, "Conceptual Framework: what concepts you will be using, how you are integrating them. You need not define any of the concepts because we already will have discussed them in class. Probably two thorough paragraphs."

Before I go on, I want to stress to you the heading that sums up the point of this paper and of my conclusion:

Learning Through Example

Although my findings suggest that instructors usually did offer the most crucial, rhetorical cues, as well as other related ones, you might want to pause and consider, "What about the assignments that do not offer cues?" What about the students who are not given clear information or enough information? They, as those of you who work in writing centers know, are the ones who expend hours of nervous energy guessing at their assignment and teachers' intentions before seeking help from us and then arriving at a workable relationship with the task at hand; or they were the ones who produce papers as haphazard as the original instructions.

While my research was on assignments in the content areas, my findings are also useful to the English teacher. We all need to remember that the educational writing process involves the interaction of both teacher and student. Student experiences grow out of instructions, and evaluation of the final written product is a response to the connection between an assignment and the product. (In fact, I'll note parenthetically, as I studied teacher comments and grades on sample compositions, I found there was a closer tie between teacher expectations, or the whole assignment, and final grade than there was between writing quality and final grade.) I'll leave you then, with that statement, and with your copies of my assignment checklist and suggestions for further reading.

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