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AUTHOR	Dunn, Dana S.
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ABSTRACT

At Moravian College, the Communication course is an interdisciplinary introduction to the writing process, designed to help freshmen develop strategies for solving problems at each stage of writing. The course is unique in that it is not meant to be taught exclusively by members of the English department and is taught in close alliance with another course in the core curriculum. Students are required tc write regularly, using techniques including freewriting, focused freewriting, descriptive responding, and descriptive outlires. Other instructional techniques include small group work and peer tutoring. Students' writing is assessed by both the English and non-English instructors, and informally evaluated by their peers. These instructional and assessment techniques are also appropriate for undergraduate psychology courses. For example, freewriting is a way of teaching students to generate ideas for course papers and an effective means of promoting class discussions. Students enrolled in introductory and intermediate level psychology classes can benefit from sharing papers and research ideas and from subsequent peer commentary. While most psychology professors favor holistic grading on writing assignments in lieu of detailed comments, it is important to provide comments on both style and content that give the writer direction for his/her future work. Undergraduate students must learn that writing is not a mechanical end in itself, but a process dependent upon related skills. (AC)

What A Psychologist Learned by Teaching Writing:

Improving Technique and Assessment

Dana S. Dunn

Moravian College

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Abstract

I relate the results of my recent experience teaching writing in a core course on communication. I present specific writing techniques and methods of assessment gleaned from this interdisciplinary venture, and recommend appropriate modifications for their use in psychology courses.

What A Psychologist Learned by Teaching Writing:

Improving Technique and Assessment

Writing can always be improved. As teachers and writers, we frequently exhort our students along this line, yet beyond the inevitable suggestions about the necessity of editing and proofreading, we are often not sure how to constructively address our concerns. We are all too aware of the problems in student writing; it's implementing solutions that escapes us. Fortunately, psychologists, like their colleagues in English, recognize this problem and are beginning to remedy it (e.g., Nodine, 1990).

Based on my recent experience teaching the interdisciplinary core curriculum writing course, Communication, I will discuss non-traditional writing techniques, including freewriting (Belanoff, Elbow, & Fontaine, 1991; Hinkle & Hinkle, 1990), small group work (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989a; 1989b), and peer tutoring (Levine, 1990). Beyond reviewing their use in Communication, I will suggest ways that non-traditional techniques can be modified for use within psychology courses.

As for the assessment of student writing, I will present methods used in the Communication course to monitor the progress and development of writing, again recommending how these methods might be appropriately applied in psychology courses. The methods of assessment include commentary on written assignments by more than one faculty evaluator, peer feedback, and optional versus mandatory rewriting.

Communication: An Introduction to Interdisciplinary Writing

The Communication course is an introduction to the writing process, and it is designed to help freshmen develop strategies for solving problems at each stage of their writing (e.g., topic development, outlining, revising, and editing). In doing so, the course provides beginning writers with instruction and practice in the basic elements of expository writing.

As an introduction to interdisciplinary writing, two features make Communication unique. First, the course is <u>not</u> meant to be taught exclusively by members of the College's English Department. Instead, the goal is to encourage participation by non-English faculty in order to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of exposition; in other words, students must realize that good writing is not restricted to English faculty or courses (cf. Knoblauch & Brannon, 1983; Raimes, 1980).

A second feature that makes the Communication course unusual is its close alliance with another course in the core curriculum. (I discuss the specifics of the coordination of our core courses in some detail elsewhere [Dunn, 1992b; Dunn, in press].) Within this curriculum, material from one course is often studied in a concurrent course--this is the case with Communication and Macrocosm/Microcosm I (M/M I), our Western culture class. Across their first semester in college, students write four papers that are "shared" between the two courses. Each writing exercise not only helps students to develop skills germane to Communication, it also allows for the

cross-fertilization of ideas from the study of Western culture. For example, students might explore the murder of Thomas Becket in M/M I, then produce an essay in Communication that draws on the material from the companion course.

Writing Techniques

The writing techniques introduced in the Communication course necessitate having students write regularly. The method used to facilitate student writing both in and outside the classroom is freewriting, and it reappears in various forms across the course (see Elbow & Belanoff, 1989a, for a detailed review of its varied forms). Freewriting is a private, continuous form of writing where the writer puts whatever comes to mind down on paper (e.g., Elbow & Belanoff, 1989a). Students are instructed to write for approximately ten minutes without regard to spelling, grammar, or punctuation, allowing themselves a wide latitude to see what ideas develop and where they lead.

As a part of the writing classroom experience, freewriting provides that rarest of things--an "evaluation-free zone" (Elbow, 1993). Instead of writing what they think faculty are after, students have the opportunity to learn to write for themselves; freewriting is not graded, evaluated, or in any way compared against some criterion. Indeed, the instructor only reads freewriting samples students are comfortable sharing.

Familiarity with freewriting comes quickly to students. Because it is ungraded and there is no set format, they do quite well at it after a only a few

trials. A major benefit of freewriting is that students quickly generate pages of material, some of which can be rewritten or integrated into developing papers. Their writing, too, often becomes more interesting because it is less planned, more self-expressive, and they feel less pressure to censor themselves or to immediately produce a "perfect" essay (Elbow, 1993).

With relatively little experience, students can move onto focused freewriting, where they write non-stop for short periods on one particular topic. Focused freewriting is particularly useful when it comes time to produce an assigned essay. This form of freewriting is a painless way for students to start papers--they simply write about the selected topic both in and outside class, gradually producing pieces that can be fit together to form a paper.

Besides using freewriting to develop ideas for their papers, students also seek constructive feedback from their peers both in and out of class. During class, we frequently break students into groups of three, and slowly introduce them to the experience of reading their writing to others. The first few times, the emphasis is on learning to read and to listen. Each group member reads a section from his or her work twice through slowly while the other students listen intently, refraining from making comments.

The next step involves descriptive responding (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989b). In this technique, listeners simply summarize what they hear without making any evaluation of it. Writers benefit from feedback indicating their ideas are being heard the way they were written. Still later, group members

read essay drafts to produce descriptive outlines (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989b). The main point and function of each paragraph are highlighted, thereby providing the writer with a gauge of the text's effectiveness. Toward the second half of the semester, group members are encouraged to seek specific areas of criticism by writers, and, in turn, feel free to make unsolicited commentary on peer writing as well.

Outside the Communication class, students are encouraged to seek assistance with their writing from peer tutors at the College's Writing Center. Our writing tutors are trained upperclass students who successfully completed the Communication course or a freshmen writing class and are themselves good writers. Students schedule hour-long appointments with tutors in the Writing Center primarily for assistance with essay drafts, revisions, or rewrites, as well as grammar work. Core student comments are uniformly positive about the peer tutoring program, and it serves as an excellent ancillary component of the Communication course.

Assessing Writing

Assessment of writing usually means grading--or, in Peter Elbow's (1993) view, ranking--an often thankless, solitary task with which we are all too familiar. In our Core writing course, we have experimented with having each student paper read by two faculty--one who teaches writing and one who teaches in M/M I. Beyond gaining a second opinion, shared grading requires a clarification of course goals: Did the student utilize the appropriate writing techniques and, if so, how effectively? Did the writer adequately address the

topic by demonstrating an understanding of the course material? Both faculty, too, have the opportunity to weigh the merit of the arguments and ideas portrayed, and to comment on the overall quality of a given paper.

Faculty in each course strive to read papers "blind," that is, beyond reading valuative comments made in the margins of papers, they usually remain unaware of a colleague's suggested grade until meeting to make that decision. As a result, a discussion of the assignment's rationale and some negotiation about the final grade often takes place. Students benefit from receiving two sets of written evaluations on one paper--different readers like different things--and they know that their final grade on any exercise was arrived at by agreement or careful deliberation.

The small group aspect of the Communication course has interesting implications for assessment as well. Because students share most of what they write with the class as a whole--or at least a small group within it--they receive constant peer assessment of their writing. This sharing with their small group is an important form of non-valuative assessment, as the students become accustomed to involving people in discussing and editing writing. Our long-term goal, then, is not merely that they become used to critical, helpful comments in the present class, but that they actively seek peer feedback for their future writing.

Finally, the course policy on rewriting is an important assessment tool because it gives instructors some sense of how well their written comments were understood by the student. Revising their work familiarizes students with

an important part of the editorial process--an opportunity to integrate readers' suggestions into their writing. The policy is that students may rewrite a paper once if they are not satisfied with an assigned grade; however, any paper receiving a "D" grade or lower must automatically be revised and resubmitted by the student within a week's time. The same two faculty members who graded the first version of a paper also grade the revision (and provide written comments as appropriate). If the revision is successful, the student receives a higher grade; otherwise, the original grade stands.

Implications for Writing in Psychology

There are, I think, several lessons to be learned from these new forms of writing technique and assessment that can aid us in teaching psychology. Below I discuss how these strategies for improving writing and its assessment could be introduced into psychology courses.

Regarding Writing Technique

As a writing technique, freewriting has clear applications in psychology classes. Students often lament that they don't know what is "appropriate" for a research paper topic; that is, they confess they are trying to write a paper for the instructor instead of themselves. As previously discussed, freewriting is a relatively easy way to teach students to generate ideas for course papers that they are truly interested in doing. Beyond idea generation, I have also found that ten minutes of freewriting at the start of a class can be an effective way to promote discussion, particularly when the material is unfamiliar or technical (see also, Pennebaker, 1990a, pp. 194-195).

Freewriting has also been hailed as a means for students to integrate the copious amounts and often diverse content of course readings and lecture notes (Pennebaker, 1990a, 1990b). We want our students to think about the important implications of psychological theories and data, but if we do not provide a meaningful context for them to assimilate such detailed information, we are inadvertently undermining the learning process. One way out of this dilemma is to try freewriting as an educational strategy that allows students to explore psychological topics within the realm of their own personal experience (Pennebaker, 1990a, 1990b). If the topic is outside student experience, providing a brief overview and then simply asking them to write continuously for a short time on their deepest thoughts and feelings about it seems to be just as effective. Pennebaker (1990a) reports that such in-class freewriting led to a decline in absenteeism and an improvement on performance on essay examinations in several of his classes.

Naturally, freewriting or any other writing technique should not diminish the importance of teaching our students to write and think like psychologists, particularly where American Psychological Association (APA) style is concerned. It has been my observation, though, that there is often a tendency in much of our teaching to emphasize adherence to style over the merit of the psychological arguments presented in student essays (not surprisingly, this seems to happen quite frequently in those lower level classes where APA style is introduced). We need to promote reliance on format for clarity and consistency, but not if it means sacrificing interesting--even

entertaining--writing in psychology. After all, today's students will be tomorrow's professionals.

Sharing student writing in psychology classes is probably rare, if not nonexistent. As faculty, we are all probably guilty of maintaining the status quo by reading student papers ourselves, writing a few comments and a grade on them, and returning them from whence they came, never giving the students the benefit of peer opinion or the experience of reading their ideas out loud. Ironically, most of us not only share drafts of our works with our peers, we probably also discuss our research and teaching ideas in some detail with them as well.

We should give our students as many classroom experiences that mimic professional life as we can, and I argue that this is particularly true where an essential skill like writing is concerned (see Dunn & Toedter, 1991). It should be relatively easy to devote some time in introductory and intermediate level psychology classes to the sharing of paper or research ideas and subsequent peer commentary. Certainly, students enrolled in behavioral statistics and methodology courses can benefit from peer review to help them translate abstract concepts into more concrete, testable terms; thus, similar to beginning graduate students who rely on a mentor, they need not feel alone on their maiden research ventures. By the time these same undergraduate students enroll in advanced psychology classes, they will already have learned to be comfortable presenting and defending their ideas in front of others and to regard peer opinion as invaluable, not threatening. What may initially seem

like a sacrifice of course content time may repay instructors and students tenfold in terms of increased writing quality and confidence. Peer feedback, then, whether in relatively informal, in-class groups; in more formal revision sessions with a peer tutor (Levine, 1990); or in a campus writing center is a straightforward means to improve student writing as well as learning.

Regarding Writing Assessment

Assessment is something most psychologists probably feel they do quite well. After all, most would boast that they are well aware of the biases inherent in subjective rather than objective methods of assessment. When it comes to writing, though, due to its very nature, assessment is more subjective than most psychologists, and possibly even many writing faculty (Elbow, 1993), would prefer. The problem, I believe, lies more with the typical assessment strategy we use in our courses than the subjective nature of writing.

Most psychology professors still tend to favor holistic grading on writing assignments in lieu of detailed comments, possibly because they are not certain how to provide effective feedback (see Willingham, 1990, for recommendations about such feedback). That being said, my recent experience teaching writing has shown me the importance of providing comments about both content and style on student papers. Such comments should go beyond praise or criticism--it is not sufficient, for example, to simply note that a passage is well or poorly crafted; the grader must provide a rationale for a particular reaction, one that gives the writer some direction for

his or her future work. We are used to doing this when writing professional reviews for refereed journals, so why not take a similar stance for student papers? And most of us must admit that we have benefitted from such professional reviews ourselves, however painful some of the constructive comments may have been.

Team teaching, of course, may be a less frequent occurrence in many psychology curricula. Nonetheless, team-taught methods courses are by no means a rarity, and faculty who teach them may wish to consider the virtues of reading all the papers and then discussing each together, instead of relying on the usual division of labor. Although such a strategy may be more demanding at the start, the payoff will come later when the quality and depth of the writing improves.

I will not revisit the arguments concerning the utility of peer review, except to say that it is clearly a positive form of assessment for psychology courses. Encouraging students to share their ideas and to comment on the work of others in a workshop format can not only improve their critical faculties, these activities can also serve as a form of self-assessment through peer comparison. Actively listening and responding to the writing of others can be informative about one's own strengths and shortcomings.

Finally, I think it is time to revisit the issue of having students rewrite papers in psychology classes. Many of us may regularly require that papers receiving a failing grade be rewritten, but far fewer professors probably leave this option to any student who feels compelled to improve a "final" draft a

second time. Faculty time and workload are clearly at issue here, but these concerns may be offset by the fact that developing good editing and revising skills among student writers may improve their future work (and thus faculty grading efforts), not merely the essay at hand. For once, taking the long view regarding student writing may be an adaptive educational strategy.

Conclusions: What I Learned by Teaching Writing

Undergraduate students, whether in psychology or other disciplines, must learn that writing is not a mechanical end in itself but a process dependent upon related skills, such as effective speaking and listening. The writing techniques and assessment methods that I presented in this paper frame writing as an intellectual activity--a dominant, self-expressive form of communication--that must be "owned" by the student (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989). Teachers of psychology can benefit from treating writing "as a process that can be learned and for which strategies should be taught" (Nodine, 1990, p. 4). My interdisciplinary writing experience has suggested some applications for psychology which I hope aid in teaching writing techniques and their assessment. After all, writing can always be improved.

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Address correspondence to D. S. Dunn, Department of Psychology, 1200 Main Street, Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA 18015; e-mail: dunn@moravian.edu.