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School to Work: Using Active Learning to Teach Business Writing

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To succeed as tomorrow's workers in the knowledge society of the new century—a world characterized by ceaseless change, boundless knowledge and endless doubt, today's business writing students must develop the skills and traits needed to become creative problem-solvers, flexible team-players and risk-taking life-time learners (Bereiter, 2002a). And teachers must play an important role in helping students transit successfully from school to work by finding ways to develop useful life skills and the flexibility that facilitates a willingness to work cooperatively and a readiness to learn continuously. Preparing today's students for tomorrow's work world challenges 21st century teachers to reinvent their professional personas by creating a fresh professionalism founded not on old, comfortable abilities and attitudes, but on new, unfamiliar skills and traits. For many teachers (most of whom teach exactly as they were taught—typically, following the talk-chalk model that fills a classroom with five or 10 rows of passive listeners in fixed seats, and fills a class period with 50 or 60 minutes of garbled monotones in lecture format), learning to teach in ways they were not taught represents the greatest challenge of their careers (Silberman, 1996; Hargreaves, 2003). Challenging students and teachers to rearrange the furniture and to reconfigure the lecture, a well-considered active learning model (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) can be applied to the business writing classroom (an application unexplored in the literature) to help students develop the abilities and attitudes most required for success in the work world of the 21st century (an area explored in the "futuristic business literature")—to help students learn and transit. In fact, classes in business writing, professional writing and technical writing can function, through the use of active learning strategies, as dynamic workshops in which students can prepare for the change and doubt of the knowledge society by becoming creative and flexible, cooperative and confident, eager and ready to learn and work. The paper explores the active learning techniques (e.g., preview lists) used successfully in a decade of business writing classes taught at a typical Midwestern American university.

Keywords: active learning, business writing, knowledge society, professional writing, technical writing

Introduction: "The Moment One Learns English, Complications Set In"

Those words, not spoken by a student of business writing, but penned by a native son of Barcelona[1], open *Chromos* and at the same time, the Pandora's box of complications awaiting not only readers and critics of the metafictional novel, but also non-native and native speakers of the English language. A picaresque precursor of

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[1] The references to the literature on Felipe Alfau (1902-1999) are a tribute to the city and country of this paper's presentation—Barcelona, Spain, at the 16th International Learning Conference, in July 2009. The references to the research on Chinese immigrants are a tribute to the *US-China Education Review*, sponsored by the American Sino-US Association of Entrepreneurs.

postmodernism, novelist Felipe Alfau himself complicates things—most notably, perhaps, the body of "self-reflexive works written in English by non-native speakers in search of a soul"—by using linguistic techniques that reached far ahead of his time and far beyond his place (Adams, 1999, p. 5).

For the author of *Chromos*, writing not in Spain, but in the US; not in Spanish, but in English, has the non-native's well-documented difficulties to reach fluency—spoken and written, and find frequent and fun-filled expression in fiction. For Alfau, himself a transplant working as a translator, the effects of multicultural contexts on language learning which are elaborated more recently in scholarly research, for example, on Chinese immigrants transplanted to Spanish schools (Milans, 2006), would have seemed obvious. Far from homeland, Alfau (1999) might have been expected to draw the tragicomic consequences of entry into the English-speaking world for the Spanish immigrant. In fact, in Alfau's fictional world, "acquisition of this other language" encumbers the non-native speaker with "too much equipment for what had been, after all, a process as plain as living" (p. 8)—and effects a gradual loss of the ability even to think straight.

For the narrator of *Chromos*, however, non-natives are not the sole speakers whose ways of living and thinking are complicated by learning the English language, "This applies to all persons, including those born to the language". Indeed, the narrator explores language learning in an unexpected and engaging "machristological"[2] examination of the environment of the native English speakers—self-consciously imbrued in "implications and intricacies to which one had never given a thought", doggedly pursued by meaningless problems, meddlesome philosophies and "other things which never gave a damn for one's existence". As the reader of *Chromos* soon learns that, all English speakers, non-native and native alike, finally share a "complete incapacity to understand the obvious" (Alfau, 1999, pp. 7-8).

In the work-related business writing classes that the author teaches, the students, non-native and native, non-traditional and traditional, part-time and full-time, undergraduate and professional, find almost nothing obvious. For the students, the sole self-evident truth seems to be that, by definition, a writing class, any writing class, lacks meaning. For the students, mostly doubtful Millennials (in the literature referred to as "Generation Y", the "Net generation", the "Dot-Com" generation, "Trophy kids", "Echo Boomers" and "Generation Y not?"), are fearful of the consequences of their own lack of preparation, ability or interest—a class in business writing must deliver the goods, viz., the skills needed to get a good job (for those not yet working) or a better job (for those already working).

Of course, if they are to prosper as tomorrow's workers in the knowledge society of the new century (Bereiter, 2002a)—a constantly changing world of ever-developing knowledge and never-ending doubt—today's business writing students must develop the skills and traits required for success. In this connection, as many studies stress, teachers must play an important role in helping students transit successfully from school to work by finding ways to develop useful "life skills" and the flexibility that facilitates a willingness to work cooperatively and a readiness to learn continuously. By applying a well-considered active learning model (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) to classes that involve a world-of-work connection (e.g., business writing, professional writing and technical writing), teachers can help students learn and transit. And by becoming engaged participants in active learning strategies defined by Paulson and Faust (1998) as "Anything

[2] In *Chromos*, "brachistological" (from the Greek: "βραχύς" means "short" and "λογικός" means "worded", i.e., "short-spoken" or laconic) is used to describe Spanish speakers as opposed to wordy Anglophones. Not in *Chromos*, the derivative "machristological" (from the Greek, "μακρύς" means "long", and "λογικός" means "worded", i.e., "long-winded") would be used to describe the opposite quality.

that students do in a classroom other than merely passively listening to an instructor's lecture" (p. 1), business writing students can prepare (for example, by means of Preview Lists) for careers as cooperative and confident workers in the 21st century.

The World of School

Humanities in Crisis: The Way to Active Learning

The author's career, both in and out of academia, attests to the fact that he is a humanist. Both his education (in foreign language, music, literature and philosophy) and his experience (as translator, editor, administrator and educator in the US and overseas) attest to the fact that he values his humanistic, liberal arts background. It is a strength of his teaching at Iowa's Graceland University, a small, mid-American liberal arts school where students receive an education grounded in the core values of caring and community—an education of the human, by the human and for the human. But it is also a critical weakness: professing the humanities and teaching in the division of humanities (traditionally, the home of writing classes from poetry writing to professional writing), in the 21st century classroom of young, modern, image-bred computerati requires a self-investment of heart and head that needs much time to develop.

In "The Stupidity Crisis", a late 20th century paper as relevant as some paper now, Robert Pattison re-invested the role of the humanist with value while developing resistance to the repeated message of typical humanities apologists, viz., that universal stupidity will engulf American society unless "serious humanism" receives an unequivocal endorsement not only of undying respect, but also of unending resources. Reviewing the work of two writers on the humanities: Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* and Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, Pattison (1988) argued against the conclusion that "Young Americans are extraordinarily stupid", "Young Americans don't know much" and that the ignorance of young Americans promises "the decline and fall of the American way of life" (p. 4). On Pattison's account, Bloom bestowed a crisis on the bankrupt young American soul, and Hirsch bestowed a crisis on the empty young American brain. And, as always, "Most guilty are university teachers of humanities" (p. 6).

Delivered in 1987, Pattison's "University community lecture in the humanities at North Arizona University" predated by 20 years a recent conference called in New York to answer the urgent question, "A crisis in the humanities?". In July 2007, scholarly human beings from all around the world, teachers included, squeezed their varied humanistic backgrounds into backpacks and congregated at Columbia University to share variations on a familiar theme for three days. Of course, in the intervening years, varied versions of the question have been asked and answered many times—sometimes in presentation and sometimes in print. Some (in articles and books that link the closed, switched-off American mind to the turned-on television and open computer, complaining of the loss of cultural literacy in the wired bunch all the while) have claimed that the crisis is upon us—is, in fact, here at hand! Others, in the manner of Bishop Berkeley (1710; 1999), a wise student of human nature, who saw with what conviction "We have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see", have claimed that the crisis is hand-made and self-serving—a pseudo-crisis concocted, most likely, by the cocky humanists themselves! Still others, so-called saviors of the humanities who convinced of an enlightened calling and a grand cause, have looked for the nearest dustpan (Simpson, 2007; Graff, 1990).

The author does not have illusions of grandeur about either his division or his profession. However, the author does have around 20 years of experience in the humanities—the last 10 of which he has enjoyed at Graceland, a little-known but big-hearted school that transforms the lives of students from more than 40 states

and 35 countries by advocating a traditional humanistic educational experience that values learning, wholeness and community. Since joining the Graceland community in 1999, he had often renewed his emotional and intellectual commitment to his division and profession by keeping abreast of developments not just in specific areas, like literature and philosophy, but also in general humanities pedagogies. Thus, for example, since his introduction to the theory and practice of active learning during his early years at Graceland, the author has created a body of several hundred active learning exercises (Karmas, 2006; 2008) that has helped many of his humanities students become the creative and flexible problem-solvers and team-players who will thrive as successful workers in a knowledge society.

Preparing students in today's school world for success in tomorrow's work world challenges 21st century teachers to revisit past mentors and models, to revise old paradigms and philosophies and to become knowledge society catalysts. Helping students succeed in the knowledge society of the new century—a world characterized by ceaseless change, boundless knowledge and endless doubt, requires that teachers re-invent their professional personas by creating a fresh professionalism founded not on old, comfortable abilities and attitudes, but on new, unfamiliar skills and traits (Hargreaves, 1994; 2003). For some teachers (many of whom teach exactly as they were taught, typically, following the talk-chalk model that fills a classroom with five or 10 rows of passive listeners in fixed seats, and fills a class period with 50 or 60 minutes of garbled monotones in lecture format)—learning to teach in ways they were not taught represents the greatest challenge of their careers.

The knowledge and insight that the author has gained while learning to teach in ways he was not taught (because the majority of his undergraduate and graduate school teachers were sages on stages, non-stop lecturers who expected students to be non-stop note-takers)—have led him to advocate the use of active learning in all of his humanities classes—from business writing and essay writing to French and Greek, from literature and philosophy to junior seminar and freshman English. As advocates know, by challenging teachers and students to reconfigure the lecture and to rearrange the furniture, the active learning model can engage, enlighten and empower teachers as well as students. And classes can function, through the use of active learning strategies, as dynamic workshops in which students (even the super tech-savvy, somewhat self-absorbed Millennials[3] who filled his classrooms during the last decade) can prepare for the unending uncertainty of the knowledge society by becoming creative and flexible, cooperative and confident, eager to risk and ready to learn. Interestingly, the continual readiness to learn, the trait most prized by today's active-learning advocates, is also the quality most valued in tomorrow's knowledge-society workers.

In his monumental work and in words more than a decade old, Silberman (1996) made an early argument for the use of active learning strategies for students in the knowledge society, "Because today's students face a world of exploding knowledge, rapid change and uncertainty, they can be anxious and defensive". As a result, of course, today's students, especially the concerned Millennials in the author's writing classes, can be expected to blossom when engaged in group activities and collaborative exercises that foster "a feeling of safety and security". Further, when students are arranged in groups tasked with activities fostering interdependence, they are engaged in the collaborative work that, on Silberman's view, leads students to master

[3] Sources on the Millennials differ as to both years and traits. According to Demby (2009), Generation Y (born 1978-2000) is "tech savvy, smart, global open minded, and very ambitious". According to NAS (2009), Generation Y (born 1977-1994—70 million strong and 20% of the population) is "racially and ethnically diverse, independent, empowered, and optimistic". According to Krayewski (2009), Generation Y (born 1982-2000—and, three years later, 78 million strong and 25% of the population) is "strong-willed, passionate and optimistic". And according to Kane (2009), Generation Y (born in the mid-eighties and later) is a "tech-savvy, family-centric, achievement-oriented, team-oriented, attention-craving" group.

learning, "Giving different assignments to different students prompts students not only to learn together but also (to) teach each other" (p. 5). And, according to the active learning credo of Silverman based on the wisdom of Confucius (p. 1):

> What I hear, I forget.
> What I hear and see, I remember a little.
> What I hear, see, and ask questions about or discuss with someone else, I begin to understand.
> What I hear, see, discuss, and do, I acquire knowledge and skill.
> What I teach to another, I master.

Active Learning in Crisis: The Way to Helpful Teaching

The author's work with active learning techniques has challenged not just the hearts and heads of his students, but his feelings and thoughts as well. In his earliest experimentation with active learning, which focused on literature and philosophy classes, the author tossed caution into the wind and lecture notes out of the window to make room for dynamic groups of students whose active participation would ensure and enhance learning. Daily, he redesigned the classroom trappings: moving students and seats with equal abandon, oblivious to queries like "Should I take a seat now or are you going to move us around again today?". His literature students were asked to form teams spelling POEM (for paraphrase, occasion, explanation and meaning) three times a week. And his philosophy students were required to form groups spelling TEAM (for tell us, example us, ask our questions and make our discoveries) twice a week. Of course, system got in the way of substance more than once a week: Students spent so much time getting ready to learn by getting into changing groups that actual active learning was delayed, even more so by the inevitable handful of late students whose presence requiring yet more chair-pushing and table-shoving became wearisome rather than welcome.

In those early experiments, the author waited expectantly and was eager to welcome learning into his classrooms of active humanities novices. Indeed, he expected that his students would learn by working together in class on readings completed outside of class. As has often been reported in the literature, however, active learning based on assigned readings does not work when students do not buy the required books or do not do the assigned readings—unless, of course (Hargreaves, 1994; 2003), the teacher rethinks old attitudes and abilities to develop unfamiliar traits and skills. When the proverbial push came to shove, he wanted to help his students learn and succeed—as much as he wanted to make a success of his position at a university that advocated what was a new way of teaching that he needed to learn and in time to re-learn: Eventually, he tossed out not only expectations regarding student purchasing habits, but also assignments assuming students' reading habits.

While, at first, it was hard for him to feel compassion for registered students who systematically refused to purchase texts or regularly failed to read assignments, it was easy for him to rethink active learning exercises. The author immediately redesigned his in-class group assignments to focus on concepts and skills that could be developed during the scheduled class periods regardless the level of students' under-preparation. Thus, for example, while an early active learning exercise on Orwell's "Politics of the English Language" (1946) required that students define and give examples of terms taken from the text (e.g., "dying metaphors", "verbal false limbs", "pretentious diction" and "meaningless words"), a later exercise provided the definitions and examples and also reproduced an Orwellian parody of a verse from *Ecclesiastes*, written (on Orwell's humorous description) in "modern English of the worst sort" and invited students to rewrite another Biblical verse applying Orwellian principles (p. 168). Similarly, an early active learning exercise on William Lutz's "Doubts About Doublespeak" (1989) again required students to explain concepts taken from the piece (e.g.,

"euphemism", "jargon", "bureaucratese" and "inflated language"); but a later exercise included the background information (the definitions and examples) and asked students to write emails using and then eliminating doublespeak to address specific audiences (p. 185).

The author's efforts to address and rethink his own disapproval of students' attitudes and behaviors have resulted not only in a more dynamic classroom of happily engaged participants, but also in a more helpful body of active learning exercises better able to meet the needs of his students, who, like others of their generation, have expectations about learning and living unlike his own. Many of his students participate actively in the green movement: For them, it matters that every college student buys about one tree's worth of books per semester. Similarly, many of the author's students, members of the first native online population, prefer reading virtual texts to reading actual books: For them, it means that every college class should acknowledge the expanding online resources (from academic e-books to social book-renting sites) available to students who spend more time engaged with the Internet than glued to the TV. Finally, most of his students who can expect to change jobs upwards of 20 times in their lifetimes, spending only about one year on any one job (Krayewski, 2009) as they search for "meaningful work and a solid learning curve" (Kane, 2009, p. 2), expect to graduate from college with enormous debt: For them, it makes sense to cut corners when and where they can.

While the author is glad that his students no longer cut classes because they fear the consequences of not having bought the assigned book, the author still can not say that he approves of students who come to class under-prepared. Admittedly, he would still prefer that all university students bought all texts, required and optional, and completed all readings, required and optional. Reading and writing are interconnected activities: For many years, the author has helped his humanities students learn to dialogue with texts by creating interactive gist notes (in-text marginalia on the form and content, the what and how, the subject and rhetoric, of each paragraph)—something that can not happen when students lack books. But the author has learned to see the textbook issue from the optimistic perspectives of his students (Krayewski, 2009; NAS, 2009), who, typical of their generation, do not think twice about questioning authority or attacking convention (Kane, 2009), and he has learned to construct active learning exercises that help students master needed concepts and skills whether or not they do the assigned readings before coming to class[4].

Some students, like some teachers, come to the writing class burdened by fear: All of the author's humanities classes develop thinking skills and so, challenge students. But literature and philosophy courses include demanding reading assignments, writing courses, from "Modern Rhetoric" (for freshmen and fresh women) to "Advanced Composition" (for juniors and seniors), which integrate provocative reading assignments as well as challenging writing assignments. Provoking discussion more than two decades ago, Pattison (1988) noted that "Anyone who has taught Freshman English has encountered something more than mere stupidity in his or her classroom he or she often encounters a visceral resistance to the whole notion of education" (p. 5). For the students enrolled in a writing class in a university of Pattison's day, the natural response to education was not reverence, but suspicion. Nowadays, to recast Pattison (1988), "Anyone who has taught writing has encountered something more than mere suspicion in his or her classroom—He or she often

[4] In an informal evaluation that the author conduct in advanced writing classes at the end of the semester, he asked students to tell what percent of the assigned outside readings they have completed. The author was usually disappointed, even the best students, i.e., those earning grades of A or A-, regularly admit to completing only 70%-75% of the assigned readings. Hobson (2004) reported that about 30% of university students can be expected to complete an assigned class reading on any given day—a compliance rate that has not fluctuated for more than 30 years.

encounters a palpable fear about the whole process of education" (pp. 3-10).

At Graceland, students usually register for the author's writing courses because his classes meet general education requirements. And his students come to these classes with fears, particularly about the process of writing to find expression in an active learning exercise called as "3, 2, 1"—He administers at the beginning of the semester and (in a slightly altered form) at the end of the semester. In this early exercise, students are asked to identify three things they want to learn (in the class), two things they want to ask (about the class), and one thing they want to say (about the topic of the class: e.g., business writing, essay writing, technical writing, etc.). Students' responses like those following reveal the sorts of concerns that worry some students at the start of class, from small issues like life before semi-colons to big issues like life after Graceland: "I want to learn how to write like a professional", "I want to learn to write a decent resume so I can get a good job", "I want to become a better writer so I can go to graduate school", "Is this class hard?", "Are you a hard grader?", "Do you grade down for sentence fragments?", "Are you the kind of teacher I can talk to if I have personal problems?", "Why does a business major like me need a writing class?", "How will taking this class help land me a better job?", "I'm not a good writer, so I took this class instead of essay writing", "I don't know the difference between a comma and a colon", "I don't know how to write a summary", "All of my teachers have told me that I suck at writing", "I never liked reading and writing—and I'm really slow", "English has always been my worst subject", "I never had an English teacher who liked my writing", "I don't know anyone in this class—maybe they're all English majors", "I wish there were no English classes", and "I don't know why I have to take this class".

Knowing the concerns of his writing students at the outset of a class (and the variations that occur from semester to semester, from class to class, from student to student) allows the author to customize by constantly rethinking and changing, his active learning exercises and thus to better help his students learn. Further, learning about the fears his students face and it is noteworthy that Millennials are often described as "confident" and fearless continuously challenges how the author thinks and how the author teaches. And for some thinkers in education, this is how it should be: In fact, recent literature on preparation for the constant changes of the 21st century includes research on the roles not just of students, but of teachers as well. Thus, for example, in *Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity*, Andy Hargreaves (2003) argued that "In their preparation, their professional development, and their working lives" (p. 2), teachers must develop a skills set responsive to the needs of knowledge-society-bound students—a new professionalism characterized by eight defining behaviors including, for example, a commitment to continuous learning and a capacity for change and risk. In language reminiscent of Pattison, Hargreaves insisted that to best help students thrive in the knowledge society, "Teachers must take their place again among society's most respected intellectuals—moving beyond the citadel of the classroom to being, and preparing their students to be, citizens of the world" (p. 24).

The World of Work

The Way to Transition: Application of Active Learning and Helpful Teaching to Business Writing Classes

Recently, thinkers in education, business and government have worked hard to identify the knowledge, skills and abilities that will best prepare today's students for their roles as citizens and workers in the 21st century world of increasing knowledge and decreasing certainty. In liberal education of a knowledge society, for example,

Bereiter (2002b) argued that in their preparation for life and work in the knowledge society, students must become citizens in the world of ideas. According to Bereiter (2002b), as teachers begin to focus on knowledge construction in the classroom—on 21st century instruction that encompasses "both the grasping of what others have already understood and the sustained, collective effort to extend the boundaries of what is known" (p. 25), students must develop a basic set of "personal qualities" including, for example, imagination, creativity, ability to work in groups, communication, problem-solving, "and above all a continual readiness to learn" (p. 13).

Similarly, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004), an advocacy group claiming a membership that includes businesspeople, educators and policymakers, defines a learning framework based on a set of essential skills that students need to succeed "as citizens and workers" in the knowledge society of the new century. Providing a framework for 21st century learning and teaching at different educational levels, the partnership outlines the supports (e.g., the learning environments) and the outcomes (the blending of skills, knowledge, expertise and literacies) that must work together to help students acquire competency in the "multi-dimensional abilities" required in the 21st century. According to the partnership, the basic elements of a 21st century education include: (1) core subjects (including foreign languages); (2) 21st century content (including global awareness); (3) learning and thinking skills (including critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration); (4) information, media and technology skills (including computer literacy); and (5) life skills (including adaptability and flexibility, personal and social responsibility, and people skills).

Despite different elements of knowledge content and nomenclature, these and similar studies emphasize the role of educators in helping students transit successfully from school to work through the development of important "life skills" or "personal qualities"—most importantly, perhaps, the flexibility that can vouchsafe not only a willingness to work productively in groups (teamwork skills), but also a readiness to learn continuously (in groups or independently)[5]. Almost by definition, active learning, that according to Silberman (1996), is the learning in which "Students do most of the work studying ideas, solving problems and applying what they learn out of their seats, moving about and thinking aloud" (p. ix), can be trusted to involve students' interaction. And application of the active learning model to classes that already boast a world-of-work connection (e.g., business writing, professional writing and technical writing) can almost guarantee that writing students, despite early fears, can prepare for the changes and doubts of the knowledge society by developing the flexibility needed to become creative problem-solvers, cooperative team-players and risk-taking life-time learners.

During a decade of experimenting with active learning, the author has taught work-related writing classes

[5] See example of Ali (2002) on the works of R. Lommel and J. Lommel in identifying the following skills set needed by 21st century workers: (1) personal qualities and attitudes (integrity and honesty; personal responsibility and self-discipline; sociability—understanding of others, friendliness, empathy and teamwork; curiosity; flexibility and adaptability; self-motivation); (2) basic tools (communication skills including proficiency in English and highly desirable in Spanish or another foreign language) and quantitative skills; (3) thinking skills (including knowing how to learn, information search skills, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, pattern recognition skills, critical skills and creative skills). See Hargreaves (1994) on the traits of organizations likely to prosper in a knowledge society: "flexibility, adaptability, creativity, opportunism, collaboration, continuous improvement, a positive orientation towards problem-solving and commitment to maximizing their capacity to learn about their environment and themselves" (p. 63). See Bereiter (2002) on the skills of workers likely to prosper in a knowledge society: "Imagination and creativity, ability to work in groups, communications skills, information-finding skills, problem-solving abilities, technological literacy, and above all a continual readiness to learn" (p. 13). See The AAC & U (The Association of American Colleges and Universities) (2007) for similar findings based on studies conducted by Hart Research, Inc. (2006). The AAC & U cited the following learning outcomes as important for success in the 21st century work world: integrative learning, knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills (teamwork skills underscored), personal and social responsibility (teamwork skills topping the list).

not just in the standard (16-week) semester format, but also in the intensive (3-week) summer program and the specialized (9-week) term program, both at the main Graceland campus and the university's satellite institutions (e.g., AIB College of Business in Des Moines, Iowa, and North Central Community College in Trenton, Missouri). Thus, the author has learned to adapt his active learning exercises to the specific needs of his writing students from full-time undergraduates taking primarily day classes to full-time working professionals taking exclusively night courses after a full day's work. In most cases, his students have entered his business and professional writing classes with the usual concerns—the worries about a lack of preparation, ability or interest on their part. For the most part, his professional writing students also have shared a sense of urgency about the class: They have expressed a strong desire that the class delivered, in terms of providing the skills needed to get a good job or (for those full-time employed) a better job.

His experience in designing active learning exercises for his business and professional writing students has found that the best results are yielded by applying a baker's dozen guidelines—12 key principles taken from the extensive literature on the subject and summarized by Silberman (1996) in an encyclopedic effort to present *Active Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject* (pp. 1-16) and one important guideline gathered from his 10 years in the active learning classroom (Karmas, 2009):

(1) Lecturing: While appealing primarily to auditory learners, lecturing tends to promote the (lower level) learning of only factual information;

(2) Listening: While teachers speak at about 100-200 words per minute, students hear at the rate of 400-500 words per minute;

(3) Attending: While seated in lecture-based college classrooms, students pay attention for only about 60% of the time;

(4) Retaining: While students retain about 70% of a lecture for the first 10 minutes, they retain only about 20% for the last 10 minutes;

(5) Note-taking: When listening to a lecture, only about 11% of students take notes and that number is steadily decreasing. And first-year college students record only about 11% of the critical lecture ideas of instructors (Katayama & Robinson, 2000);

(6) Blending: Because few students exhibit a strong preference for one of the three main learning styles, most students (about 66%) learn best when teachers blend auditory, visual and kinesthetic/haptic activities, i.e., when teaching is "multisensory" and "varied" (Schroeder, 1993);

(7) Seeing: While students remember about 14%-38% more when teachers enrich lectures with visual aids, authentic learning requires more than just auditory and visual stimuli;

(8) Seeking: Authentic learning actively engages students to create learners who are curious and questioning, learners who, according to Silberman (1996), are "seeking something—an answer to a question, information to solve a problem, a way to do a job" (p. 4);

(9) Experiencing: Most entering college students (about 60%) exhibit an orientation towards learning that is practical rather than theoretical (Schroeder, 1993);

(10) Concretizing: Before entering college, most students demonstrate a preference (by a five to one ratio) for learning activities that are "concrete active" rather than "abstract reflective" (Schroeder, 1993);

(11) Connecting: Because inclusion in a group helps students satisfy the need to feel secure and to belong (a need which "must be met before the need to reach out, take risks and explore the new"), group work requiring the interdependence of group members enhances students' learning;

(12) Participating: Authentic learning requires the complete participation of the students, who must do something with the provided information (e.g., paraphrasing or identifying the information, giving examples of or foreseeing consequences of the information).

These 12 principles elaborate the basic and perhaps, most often cited, insight of active learning advocates, the well-known lines of Chickering and Gamson (1987, p. 5):

> Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

To make a baker's dozen principles (Karmas, 2008), the author includes his own guideline, which has helped him most in designing active learning exercises that work and help students learn;

(13) Preparing: While some students can be counted on to do all assigned work, successful in-class active learning assignments cannot assume out-of-class preparation (e.g., reading of assigned work)[6].

As a teacher of business and professional writing, the author has learned (usually through the "3, 2, 1" administered at the beginning of the semester) that even full-time professionals (returning students enrolled primarily in night classes) lack collaborative skills. And while 95% of the population admit to having feared group-work at least once (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995, p. 46), Generation Y students returning to schoolwork from recent exposure to career work that demands and develops varied on-the-job, professional teamwork opportunities, including innovative online groups and virtual teams (G. Lumsden, D. Lumsden, & Wiethoff, 2010, pp. 4-5), seem especially concerned about such a deficiency. This lack has been reported in the literature: Despite a childhood filled with team sports and play groups, Generation Y (plugged in 24/7) prefers emailing and texting to interacting and communicating face-to-face, and is notably deficient in social skills involving collaboration, even unwilling to compromise or share (Krayewski, 2009).

In the "3, 2 and 1", the author administers at the end of the semester (which asks students to identify three things they have learned, two things they have applied, and one thing they will never forget) that, students regularly express satisfaction with improved collaborative skills. Students' responses like following reveal how a semester of active learning addresses early students concerns: "I learned that I have something to contribute to a group after all", "I learned that I can be assertive and don't need to be afraid of working with others", "I learned that working on teams is possible even for a shy person like me", "I volunteered to join a human resources group at work. I never would have done this before", "I'll never forget how we got better and better when we passed around the papers for the preview lists. That was fun!", "I'll always remember that this class was fun. I liked coming to class and learning new things", "I'll always remember getting a good performance review at my job. My supervisor said he liked my ability to work on teams with other people".

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[6] Principle 13 invites discussion: *The Teaching Professor* (1989) advised teachers to act both as if non-readers have done the reading and as if non-readers have not done the reading. After citing a universally recognized problem of the profession (viz., a regular lack of student motivation to do assigned readings), the piece suggests using class time to make non-reading students feel "uncomfortable", "out of it" (p. 3)—e.g., be means of references to points in the readings that invite explanation or exploration. However, the piece cautions that when teachers use class time to repeat material from the assigned readings (a useful strategy for separating non-readers from readers), students quickly learn that they need not prepare for class—i.e., that they need not do assigned readings. Doyle (2008, p. 67) affirmed that "Students don't do their reading and other assigned prep work because, based on experience, they believe that teachers will discuss any important information included in the readings during class". Davis (1993) gave eight suggestions for motivating students to read. Hobson (2004) gave 14 tips for getting students to do the assigned readings.

The Way to Success: Discussion of Active Learning Exercises for Business Writing Students

Technical report writing, one of the author's business writing classes, teaches what Riordan and Paul (2008) called the "practical writing that people do as a part of their jobs"—the writing "that gets work done". Focusing on skills, such as definition and description as well as forms like memos and proposals, the class develops the abilities of students to produce the technical writing that enables readers to act. Early in the class, students are introduced to the three essential qualities of effective technical writing: i.e., audience-centered, responsible and presentational, and are invited, early in the class text, to read about the importance of effective writing for the world of work that is audience-centered (i.e., that "aims to help its readers"), responsible (that is "an ethical endeavor") and presentational (that is structurally obvious—dramatic or revealing). For many students who understand the concepts of audience and responsibility, the "presentational" concept is not immediately obvious—even when students have read the text (pp. 3-12). As a result, the author introduces the concept using a set of active learning exercises that build on learned writing skills while building team-working abilities.

The first active learning exercise in the set, preview lists, can be completed in groups of three to 24 students (the lower and upper limits of the business and professional writing classes in which the author has used this exercise). For this exercise, an odd or even number of students work equally well and the large number helps students relax and risk while learning and applying new concepts. Because preview lists help organize a document (from a simple memo to a complex proposal), understanding their structure and function helps students make sense of the concept of presentational writing. Introducing preview lists (both the active learning strategy and the writing strategy) early in the semester ensures that students acquire a clear understanding of a foundational concept (viz., presentational writing) that they will apply many times as technical writers.

In technical writing, the preview list has three components: (1) an introductory sentence ending in a "control word"; (2) a specific mark of punctuation (viz., a colon); and (3) a series of items. The preceding sentence is an example of a preview list: (1) It contains a sentence that both introduces a subject (viz., "In technical writing, the preview list has three components") and uses a "control word" (viz., "components" names the listed items); (2) It contains a colon; and (3) It includes an itemized list (viz., in this case, it is the following three items: a sentence, a colon and a series). Because the preview list introduces a document's key terms, it provides a sense of the document's structure and so, promotes presentational writing. Although students have the opportunity to review preview lists in assigned readings, the active learning exercise that the author uses assumes no previous acquaintance with the topic other than that he provides in class, aurally and visually (typically, on the blackboard). After the 10-15 minutes' introduction, students (in the author's classes, usually already seated around a conference table) are asked to take out a pen/pencil and a piece of paper. Each student writes down a brief introductory sentence (with the word "three" and without a final period), and then passes the paper to the person on the right. That person places a colon after the introductory sentence and then passes the paper to the person on the right. The next person adds an itemized list, remembering to place a period at the end of the completed preview list. Typically, the class continues in this manner for about 20 minutes (or, in a large class, until the paper arrives at its owner).

Before continuing, it is important to note that some under-prepared students may lack an understanding of such basics of English grammar as sentences versus non-sentences, periods versus commas, and colons versus semi-colons. As a result of his experimenting with this active learning exercise, the author has found that while useful, such discussions should be deferred so that they do not delay understanding of the concept at hand, viz.,

the use of the preview list in creating presentational writing. It is also important to note that, at this point in the exercise, students are not asked to worry about or comment on the quality of either the introductory sentence or the itemized list. Again, as a result of much experimentation perhaps influenced by the classic work on free-writing ("automatic writing", "babbling" and "jabbering") of Elbow (1973), who insisted that, to foster writing skills, students free-write without evaluating. The author has learned that while evaluation is necessary, insisting on assessment of students at the outset of the activity works against the process of helping students learn the three-part structure of preview lists, which actually makes the presentational structure part of who they are. Indeed, because this active learning exercise invites students to physically mimic the three-part structure of the preview list itself, genuine interdependence is underscored and authentic understanding is achieved.

Achieving success as a technical writer requires long and hard work. But for students who participate in this active learning exercise, writing preview lists becomes second nature, easily and quickly. Students easily understand that they depend on one another to complete a preview list (and have fun when they are the lucky one required to add only a colon). And, because they are not immediately called on to evaluate their efforts, students quickly start experimenting with the opening sentences and the ending series. After they have finished passing around papers, students are asked to assess their work. Typically, students are arranged in groups of three (now, as with the writing of the preview lists, the grouping of the students mimics the structure of the preview lists). The first student reads one of his/her classmate's creations aloud and notes whether or not the colon is in the right place. The second student evaluates the introductory sentence with the all-important control word (e.g., "A story has three parts:", "The American flag has three colors:", "I have three friends:"), and the third student evaluates the itemized series (e.g., "the beginning, the middle, and the end.", "red, white, and blue.", "Tom, Dick, and Harry."). Hilarity, as might have been expected and even desired (Silberman, 1996), often ensues as students talk about and reflect on each other's work. And, as has often been observed, despite critics which fuss that active learning is "just a bunch of 'fun and games'" (p. 30) or fume "that this relaxed, humorous American view of life" (p. 7) is due to the creation of schools "where nothing substantial is learned", it was cited in Pattison (1988) that, "A sense of humor in its broadest sense is what the Humanities are about" (p. 7).

At the conclusion of the three-person component of preview lists, the class regroups for a review. At this time, students are invited to share observations with the entire class before creating written similes or metaphors capturing how they felt doing preview lists. Responses like following reveal how doing a relatively simple active learning exercise can help students achieve a sense of belonging, learning and feeling like valued members of a group ready to undertake a more complex assignment: "I feel like an important cog in a wheel. We couldn't go anywhere without me", "I feel like a rainbow where each of us is a different color by ourselves, but altogether we make something beautiful", "As if we're all on some team and just won the big game", "Like a flower on a tree—with some people being the leaves and the branches, so we can all learn and blossom together".

Working together on the second and third active learning exercises in this set, paragraphs and patterns, students build on the preview list idea to construct individual paragraphs first and then multiple paragraphs. In both exercises, students work often in multiples of three to further develop their understanding of important technical writing concepts. In paragraphs, for example, students practice "repetition" (repeating key terms from the preview list) and "sequencing" (using key terms from the preview list in the same order in the paragraph as in the list) to construct (several) four-sentence paragraphs that exhibit presentational writing. Students start this exercise by constructing a preview list together (e.g., "An essay has three parts: an introduction, a body and a conclusion"). Each student writes down the common preview list and then, writes down his/her own second

sentence (e.g., “The introduction opens the paper.”, “The introduction uses one paragraph to intrigue the reader.” or “The introduction is the hardest to write.”). When it is done, each person passes his/her paper to the student on the right. The process repeats, and each student writes down his/her own third sentence (e.g., “The body develops the main ideas of the essay.”, “The body has three paragraphs.” or “The body is the easiest to write.”). When it is done, each student again passes his/her paper to the student on the right. Paragraphs conclude (evaluation and discussion begin) when the fourth and final sentence is written (e.g., “The conclusion ends the paper.”, “The conclusion uses one paragraph to impact the reader.” or “The conclusion is the second-hardest to write.”).

Similarly, students do patterns again in groups of three by together selecting for elaboration and then writing down one of the four-sentence paragraphs completed in the previous active learning exercise, paragraphs. Each student creates his/her own second paragraph before passing his/her paper to the person on the right (e.g., “The introduction opens the paper. The introduction, sometimes called ‘the lead’, is a three-to-five sentences’ paragraph that intrigues the reader. Interesting introductions use proverbs, quotations, facts and stories to intrigue readers.”). Like paragraphs, patterns invite each student in turn to create an important component of the completed document. In this case, completion of the third and fourth paragraphs of the document requires duplicating the structure of the second paragraph (viz., a functional statement, a definition, and finally, an elaboration). For both paragraphs and patterns, which typically require more time than preview lists, students evaluate the efforts not of their own group, but of another group, and typically, share their conclusions in an open class discussion. Because students of this generation require feedback as much as praise, guidance as much as reassurance (Kane, 2009), such follow-up discussions regularly receive high ratings, e.g., “I really enjoyed how we talked about everything we did.” and “I always got into the class discussions. They helped me a lot.”. Subsequent active learning exercises, e.g., on context-setting introductions, help students focus on the “top-down” (main idea first) strategy that again elaborates the concept of presentational writing that is so often difficult for business writing students to grasp.

Conclusion: “Nothing Is So Difficult to See As the Obvious”

These words, not spoken by a student of business writing, but penned by a teacher of anthropology, Malinowski (1944; 2001, p. 158), have closed some of the author’s conversations with his more cynical colleagues, who have accused the author of grasping at straws in his efforts to apply the active learning model to all of his humanities classes, even the business writing classroom (an application still unexplored in the literature). Unlike his colleagues, the author believes that classes in business and professional writing (e.g., technical report writing) can function through the use of active learning strategies as dynamic workshops perfectly suited to foster the flexibility needed to produce students eager to learn and ready to work.

Some of the author’s less fatuous friends have charged him with ignoring the most recent version of the humanities crisis, one which replaces “stupidity” with something like “simplicity”. On college campuses across the country where keyboards rate higher than chalkboards, and chat rooms in cyberspace outnumber cars in parking spaces, today’s faint-hearted, block-headed humanities students argue that they want the simplest possible path in and out of school, the course with the lowest expectations and the highest grades, the “class of least resistance”. When the author responds, he can not resist citing the observation of Ladd (2005) that, as a humanities teacher, he has a responsibility to “trouble complacency” and “to complicate” thought (p. 3). Obviously, in the author’s opinion, the active learning model which transforms complacent and apprehensive

students into collaborative and avid learners, promises to develop the abilities and attitudes that will best prepare people for success in the world of the 21st century.

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