

Title: So What? Who Cares?—Grounding Student Writing in Community and Curiosity

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Summary: To increase engagement and strengthen student writing in an entry-level course, an English professor restructured both the use of in-class time and the course's final paper.

Background:

About the Course

English 106: First Year Writing Seminar II: Academic Research & Writing is the second class in a two-course first year writing sequence. The course uses rhetorical principles to introduce students to some of the writing tasks they will encounter in college coursework, with particular focus on learning to undertake academic inquiry, engage in close reading, incorporate research into writing, and document sources. Peer response, reflection, and revision are emphasized through a summative course portfolio. Classes are capped at 18, and most students are freshmen and sophomores. English 106 is required by every baccalaureate degree program at Park, so the course attracts a wide variety of majors, interests, and ability levels.

Core learning outcomes for the course center on academic writing skills:

- **Process:** Apply writing processes, collaborative strategies, and effective academic research practices to participate in academic discourse
- **Focus:** Maintain a controlling idea/thesis for a variety of academic genres
- **Development:** Apply strategies for developing academic arguments across the disciplines, including conducting research and incorporating culturally diverse perspectives
- **Rhetorical strategies:** Consider the rhetorical situation faced by academic writers to respond appropriately in both writing and research
- **Conventions:** Use common formats and conventions (e.g., research, structure, documentation, tone, mechanics) for various genres of academic discourse.

In addition to these learning objectives, I want my students to leave class with:

- A collection of basic writing process activities (freewriting, brainstorming, self-interviews, peer review, etc.)
- A working understanding of key rhetorical concepts (genre, purpose, audience; the Aristotelian appeals; the rhetorical notion of kairos)
- The ability to read and interpret different sorts of sources
- The ability to critically interpret sources
- The habit of explicit reflection on and in writing

But most of all, *I want my students to care*. I want them to care about what they write about. I want them to recognize that their words, their ideas, and their experiences have value. I want them to use writing and research as tools to explore their own interests, curiosities, and communities.

But after a few years of teaching the course, I realized that I wasn't quite seeing what I wanted. Much of my students' writing scanned as generic and "classroom-y." I was not seeing enough of the engagement I wanted my students to experience. So, I decided to adjust my approach. I would ask students to engage with local issues on our college campus and with issues or controversies faced by authentic communities to which students belong.

My hypothesis, if it can be called that, was that if students are asked to write about issues that they care about, and when instruction supports student curiosity, then students will produce better writing – writing that is rhetorically sophisticated, precisely argued, well-researched, urgent, timely, and includes evidence of reflection, curiosity, and meta-cognition.

Student demographics are relevant to the course. Park University serves many international students – roughly 15% of our local student population and, on average, one-quarter of the students in each iteration of the course that this portfolio documents. Park's median student age is higher than average, and many of our students are reservists or retired military. In each iteration of my course, a handful of students were working either full- or part-time, several reported raising children, and others balanced college athletics with coursework. At least a quarter of my students in each iteration were non-traditional college students in that they had taken some time off school between high school graduation and enrolling at Park.

In the baseline iteration of the course (spring 2015), I divided class time more or less equally between lecture, discussion, group work, and in-class writing. My lectures tended to be short introductions to key rhetorical concepts or process activities. Students were encouraged to use these concepts or activities to complete a major writing assignment. Occasionally I provided brief background lectures on reading assignments (for instance, a short biography of writer Jonathan Kozol, whose work led to student writing assignments). As a class, we discussed readings often, in a full-class format that I hoped was Socratic. Students also met in pairs or small groups to discuss readings, to complete activities linked to a current writing project, to explore a rhetorical concept, or to discuss drafts at all stages of the writing process. Finally, students spent a significant portion of class time writing: invention activities like freewriting, brainstorming, and looping; developing working theses, introductions, body paragraphs, and outlines; revising their own early drafts; and responding in writing to their classmates' writing.

Perceptions of student writing

In the 2015 iteration of the course, writing assignments attempted to connect students to broader conversations about important issues of common interest (for instance, education reform) and the controversies that arise in students' majors or intended career fields. In the final assignment of the semester, I asked students to write about a current issue, problem, or controversy in their major or intended career field. Students had a great deal of latitude with this assignment, although I did attempt to guide students to select "meaty" topics through which they could learn academic research and writing skills. The assignment, called the "Controversy Project," included a number of scaffolded writing activities: in-class invention activities, a rough draft, peer review workshop, individual conferences with me, a revised draft, and the presentation of a visual aid.

While some students reported that they appreciated being able to dig deeply into an area of inquiry across several weeks, many others quickly lost interest in their topics, and it showed in their writing. Readers who know Ken Macrorie's concept of "Engfish," have read David Bartholamae's "Inventing the University," or are familiar with typical freshman themes will recognize the results.

For instance, a student close to the median of achievement in his course (Spring 2015, Student B) wrote the following in the final draft of his project titled "Computers: Outstanding for Humans? Trouble for the Environment?":

The first point I am going to bring up, in arguing that computers can be a bad thing for the environment is the large amounts of unnecessary files that businesses tend to print. Sherri, who wrote in 2014 saying that large companies send mass emails and memos to employees that often times require large print jobs. With companies of over thousands of people, if each person is even printing just a couple pages a day, that is over two thousand pieces of paper printed from just once company. Fortunately we do live in a world where many people are beginning to go paperless. Things like online bill pay, power point presentations and email limit the amount of paper that is being used. However, theworldcounts.com argues that paper waste is still a big problem. From our newspapers to our paper wrappings, a lot of paper is still filling landfills and being wasted instead of being recycled.

There is much to laud in this passage. The student centers the paragraph around his own perspective: "a lot of paper is still filling landfills and being wasted instead of being recycled." The student works toward explicit synthesis of two perspectives, using phrases like "Fortunately we do live in a world where..." and "However, theworldcounts.com argues that..." Finally, the student includes some explicit reasoning to exemplify his point: "With companies of over thousands of people, if each person is even printing just a couple pages a day..." Regardless of the student's prose style or the content of his argument, these are indicators that the student has picked up some of the skills of academic discourse.

But something is missing. This representative sample lacks a sense of urgency and timeliness. A persistent vagueness and "source-iness" plagues this and much other student writing. The student fails to provide any context or occasion for his claim about paper waste. He leans on two sources without providing any real background information or analysis of those sources. Later in the paper, the student does go on to report more detailed information about paper waste and the troubling environmental effects of computer disposal – but he never explains why his research matters, nor to whom it should matter. The student has an opportunity to explore a subject of vital interest in our increasingly computer-based world, but was not yet able to establish a sense of occasion or answer the essential writing questions: So what? Who cares?

My perceptions of other Year 1 student work are similar: while the writing might be syntactically solid, the project focused on a major claim, the evidence selected with some care, and the writer working toward synthesis, a sense of urgency and curiosity is often missing. After reflecting on the Year 1 baseline iteration of the course, I sensed many opportunities for deeper engagement

with the world, with research, and with writing. That's where I began designing my implementation.

Implementation

New Assignment Sequence: Community Writing Project

To address my perceptions of unmet opportunities for growth, I refigured the final writing assignment, moving away from the "controversy in your major" assignment. Instead, I asked students to use research and multiple genres of writing to engage with and inquire in their local communities. My thinking was that students might be better engaged if they were writing to address a pressing issue that they already know something about. I invited students to think of "community" as broadly or as narrowly as they wished, and to find a problem, question, issue, or controversy in which they have a real stake. The use of the term "community" was inspired by two Park University colleagues who ask their own first-year writing students to compose ethnographies of groups they belong to – essentially, a community profile.

In the Spring 2016 writing assignment sequence, students first identified a community they belonged to, and then wrote an about an issue or problem that members of that community care about. Students wrote a proposal and, rough and final drafts of an "academic research paper" that outlined the issue and potential solutions through research, a "letter to the community" that attempted to persuade the community to adopt the student's informed position, and created a piece of multimodal "public writing" aimed at informing a public audience about the issue. Students spent time in class brainstorming communities, discussing the values and challenges faced by their communities, explicating the issue or problem, researching various positions on the issue, and sharing early invention and drafting exercises with classmates.

In Spring 2017, I simplified the project, asking students only to write a project proposal, rough and final drafts of a "report and recommendations" aimed at members of their community, and a piece of multimodal public rhetoric aimed, again, at a general audience. This freed up time for students to compose multiple drafts, meet with me in conference, and conduct more in-depth collaborative peer review activities.

In many ways, the biggest intellectual discovery of this teaching and learning project happened as I tried to figure out a method of gauging the effects of my new assignment sequence on student writing. I started by reviewing my comments on past student work, grouping my responses in order to develop a set of categories/indicators of success. In the end, I developed a reading rubric with six categories:

- Occasion, Kairos, or "So What?"
- Purpose & argument
- Use of Sources & Research
- Reflection, Curiosity, & Metacognition
- Prose, Language, & Style
- Design, Formatting, & Organization Conventions

By using this open coding method, I was hopefully able to capture what I tend to respond to in student writing. The rubric attempts to describe progressive levels of achievement – although, in practice, student scores do not always reflect the progressive development I expect.

My new assignment sequence invited a different approach to classroom instruction. To make sure that I was giving students what they needed when they needed it, I crafted a teaching matrix that described approximately what I needed to teach and when, in order to support student progress. This meant, in Spring 2016, much less class time spent on rhetorical concepts and terminology, and more time having students manage or reflect on their writing projects. In Spring 2017, more time was dedicated to exploration of rhetorical concepts as they might apply to the students' writing.

Student Work

I gauged the effects of my intervention in three ways: by reflecting on the actual writing that my students produce; by comparing rubric scores of the final drafts of the Year 1 "controversy project" and Year 2 "academic research paper" and the "report and recommendations" portions of the Year 3 community writing project; and by reviewing student comments on end-of-term teaching surveys. (These selections were chosen because they represent the lengthiest and most complex work that students undertook in each class, as well as the assignments in which students dedicated the most time.)

Comparing each year's rubric scores suggests that Spring 2016 and 2017 students had significantly higher levels of achievement than 2015 students (more than 15% difference) in the following areas:

- Identifying or invoking an audience to whom the subject matters
 - Spring 2015: 40%; Spring 2016: 85%; Spring 2017: 92%
- Centering the project around a central position or major claim
 - Spring 2015: 60%; Spring 2016: 100%; Spring 2017: 92%
- Including explicit reflection on the writer's curiosity in the subject
 - Spring 2015: 0%; Spring 2016: 92%; Spring 2017: 85%
- A unique sense of style or voice that is appropriate to the goals of the piece
 - Spring 2015: 0%; Spring 2016: 15%; Spring 2017: 31%

Rubric scores also suggest that Year 3 students outperformed Year 1 and 2 students in these areas:

- Pinpointing why the writer's perspective matters at this moment in time
 - Spring 2015: 60%; Spring 2016: 31%; Spring 2017: 77%
- Explicitly addressing the warrants, reasoning, and assumptions of both the writer's own position and the arguments of others
 - Spring 2015: 0%; Spring 2016: 0%; Spring 2017: 31%
- Including primary, original, or new research
 - Spring 2015: 0%; Spring 2016: 8%; Spring 2017: 46%
- Explicitly gauging the success the project, or describing the conditions under which the project could be said to be successful or effective
 - Spring 2015: 0%; Spring 2016: 0%; Spring 2017: 15%

On the whole, these scores seem to show that community-oriented writing assignments may have worked to enhance a sense of occasion and engagement (students who conduct original research, even if it is just an interview with an expert on the subject, are more engaged in their work), that community-oriented writing may help students to write with more focus and argumentative complexity, as well as a greater awareness of audience and timeliness.

However, some interesting anomalies arise:

- Using sources via paraphrase and summary: Spring 2015 and 2017 students far outperformed 2016 students

- A pattern of meta-commentary within the text itself: Spring 2015 and 2016 students far out-performed 2017 students
- Structural clarity: Spring 2015 and 2016 students far out-performed 2017 students
- Use of appropriate documentation conventions: Spring 2016 students out-performed 2015 and 2017 students

These anomalies could be explained any number of ways. Perhaps, Year 1 students did better with structure and using sources, because those strategies are more clearly taught in traditional academic writing classes. Or, the rubric is far too subjective and dull a tool to truly understand the qualities of student writing. Or, perhaps the sample sizes are too small.

I also counted how many rubric boxes were checked for each student. The number of boxes checked in the rubric could be an indicator of the complexity of student writing:

- Spring 2015
 - Mean: 13.6
 - Median: 14
- Spring 2016
 - Mean: 13.7
 - Median: 14
- Spring 2017
 - Mean: 15.8
 - Median: 17

This admittedly blunt scoring mechanism suggests that students in Year 3 may have made gains in the complexity of their writing.

A big caveat to this data is sample size. Only 5 of 16 students in Year 1 agreed to allow me to use their work in this portfolio, while 13 of 18 in Year 2 and 13 of 15 in Year 3 allowed me to use their work in this portfolio.

A second caveat is the reading process. While much time had passed between the when I graded each student paper and the time I assessed it for this portfolio using my reading rubric, there was still only one scorer who evaluated each student's piece of writing: me. I may not be the most reliable assessor of my student's work for the purposes of this project, and a future exploration of this project could use trained independent scorers to analyze student work.

And rubric scores, of course, do not tell the whole story. Representative samples of student work are better indicators of the sorts of gains that students made using the community-oriented writing approach. These two samples demonstrate an increased level of engagement when compared with the representative sample from Spring 2015 iteration. In "Transition Can Be Hard for Some," which was close the median of his class in terms of total number of boxes checked on the reading rubric, 2016 student N writes:

According to Ahren, et al. "Veterans frequently talked about civilian life as "normal" while it was clear that many aspects of civilian life no longer felt normal to them upon return from military service." I am a witness to this for I lived it while in the Colombian

National Army, while in the service you can only dream with the luxuries and commodities offered in the civilian life, and while in the service you await the day when you can once again join the civilian population, however what we don't realize while in the service is that many of the activities that we used to enjoy before entering the service, have now become a shallow and pedantic way of life, and once we realize this it is too late.

This paragraph is distinguished by its synthesis, however clunky it may read. The student's perspective appears complex: he is not just parroting facts and findings from sources, but is working toward blending his source's arguments with his own experiences as a soldier. The phrases "I am a witness to this" and "shallow and pedantic way of life" show a real emotional investment from the student, and have the effect of lending the work urgency and a sense of occasion. This particular student has work to do in terms of syntax, but he has answered those essential writing questions: So what? Who cares?

Likewise, Spring 2017 student 1, also at the median of her class, wrote the following:

Although there are a number of reasons for this decline, there are two major factors that affect a youth's involvement in their church: the quality of their youth ministry, and the religious influence from parents in the home. The reason for a church's poor youth ministry may vary depending on the church. For many youth, it's a lack of depth. Fun meet and greets, candy, and superficial, repetitive "Jesus loves you"s can only hold a teenager's attention for so long, as discovered by Carol Lytch in a study conducted for her book, *Choosing Church (What Attracts and Keeps Youth)*. A sense of belonging, meaning, and opportunities to develop competence were all things that consistently drew youth into the church(*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*). While these elements can be fairly easy to incorporate, they are also easily left out of a program. Churches become so desperate to grow their youth ministries that they become all about attracting youth and forget the things that will make teens want to stay. A study by the Barna Group found that 66% of teens ranked worshipping and making a connection with God as the most important thing they looked for in a church and youth group (Steptoe). If a church is investing all of their time in flashy attractions, they are neglecting the things that teens truly want, the things that will keep them within the group.

This paragraph also demonstrates the synthesis of multiple sources, as well the careful use of precise examples to illustrate the problem that the student writer wants to solve. It is clear from this paragraph and others that the student has experienced the negative effects of a "lack of depth" in church youth programming; likewise, this student suggests that she understands reasons why the problem may exist ("...they become all about attracting youth and forget the things that will make teens want to stay"). Finally, I notice that this student's very subject matter, while not academic in the sense of a traditional academic discipline, calls out for academic research and writing strategies: posing a question, analyzing the roots of a problem, collecting relevant theory and research, and examining relevant examples. The student is doing the intellectual work of academic writing here.

While I did not ask end-of-semester survey questions of my 2015 students, I did ask 2016 and 2017 students to name the "most helpful" assignment and the assignment they felt "most engaged

by." About 40% of 2016 students named the research paper or the community writing project as the most helpful, while only 22% of 2017 students named the report and recommendations or community writing project as most helpful. However, 67% of 2016 students and 89% of 2017 students named some element of the community writing project as the most engaging assignment in the class. Because I believe that the only real way you can tell if you have made a difference to a student is if they tell you, I put a great deal of trust in student responses. I conclude that, even if the new assignment sequence had led to only modest gains in complexity, the fact that most students found the work to be engaging tells me that I should retain this assignment for future iterations of the class. Furthermore, I conclude that focusing on community-oriented writing, rather than traditional "academic discourse" helps students develop academic writing skills and enhances student engagement.

Reflections

Most students, especially those in a first year writing class, do not see themselves as members of an academic discipline. While the task of EN 106 is to teach students academic writing and research skills, I cannot count on students have much or any sense of an academic discipline. As Bartholamæ argued 30 years ago, students, especially first-year students, are inventing a discipline every time they sit down to write. But what is an academic discipline other than a big, confusing community? A community or series of communities that very few first- and second-year undergraduates belong to.

Because of this, many students struggle to engage with generalized academic discourse. Many students, however, do see themselves as members of social communities, and that membership can be leveraged in the first-year writing classroom to teach students academic writing habits and to enhance engagement. And this approach seems to work! When a 2016 student writes about the cultural taboo of divorce in her native Chinese culture, she is doing intellectual work, analyzing an issue that happens to have both personal and academic significance. Likewise, when a 2017 student argues that the culture of the United States Marines Corps leads directly to retired Marines refusing to seek medical treatment for fear of being seen as weak, he is using academic habits and skills, including conducting primary research collected from his fellow Marines, to solve a problem of enormous complexity and significance. When a second 2016 identifies the leadership qualities of effective soccer coaches, she brings academic research strategies to bear on important issues, only in a field that many would not recognize as academic. When 2017 Student B identifies ways that music educators and students can adjust their practices in order to lessen the likelihood of performance-related injury, she is doing real intellectual work. What can be lost in a community-oriented writing class is the focus on key rhetorical concepts and terminology, as well as a sense of common class spirit. In the Year 2 iteration of the course, I realized that elusive sense of class spirit. Because students were working with a wide range of subjects and approaches, class began to feel, to me at least, like a series of single-student seminars. We lost the Socratic discussion of common readings or the sense of an ongoing class conversation. To use the terminology of television writers, the first implementation iteration had many fewer "callbacks" to earlier classes.

I missed that sense of shared exploration, so, in the 2017 iteration, I attempted to balance the course. The first six or seven weeks looked more like the 2015 course: students read and discussed a cluster of themed texts, which inspired ongoing discussion, several writing projects, and helped students develop a common rhetorical vocabulary with which to talk about their writing. Then, in the second half of course, students pursued the community writing project.

This innovation is far from complete, but the level of accomplishment of several students in my 2017 course suggests what's possible when "academic writing" is re-framed as "community writing." My experience, as documented in this portfolio, supports an ironic conclusion: that more students can make gains as academic writers if first-year writing courses become *less* academic and more geared to the issues that students already know and care about. Contact CTE with comments on this portfolio: cte@ku.edu.