

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

SIMULATING PROFESSIONAL WRITING EXPERIENCES IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

A positive new trend has come to academic writing classes - many schools are emphasizing professional writing skills in an advanced course. A growing number of schools, recognizing that students need thorough training to compete in the job market, are requiring such a course. While merely requiring more writing of any kind would probably help many students, adding writing experiences that correspond to the type of writing that will be done on the job is most helpful.

My experience in teaching in professional writing programs in California and Maryland offers some useful ideas on how to design such writing assignments.

A NEW FOCUS FOR WRITING CLASSES

Traditionally, academic writing skills have been taught by English departments and have been writer-centered; the only audience was the course instructor. In professional writing, however, "the audience is outside of the classroom and the purpose is to communicate as clearly and efficiently as possible." [2] Because of this difference in aim, a nationwide trend is to require two writing courses of all students: Freshman English (composition), which teaches writing skills of organization, logic, grammar, and mechanics; and a Junior level course teaching writing for students' professional choices. This upper division writing course is an excellent way to train students to write as they will on the job -- if experiential learning is integrated into the syllabus.

Pre-professional writing courses could emphasize the same writing skills covered in Freshman English and still help most students to improve their writing skills, of course. However, this new junior level course is a very good opportunity for teachers to add experiential techniques to a type of class -- writing -- that often is taught solely by a traditional lecture method. Adding to such a class writing opportunities that replicate as closely as possible writing that students of different majors will do on the job is a better way of teaching the applied skill of writing than is lecturing. Several programs in upper division writing are being added every year; adding experiential learning should be encouraged as these classes are developed.

Junior Level Writing Students

Depending on the school, upper division writing classes may contain virtually all junior level students (the University of Maryland, where only students with an A in Freshman English are exempted), or only junior and above students in certain majors (accounting, information systems, history, English, linguistics, political science, anthropology, and chemistry at San Diego State University, where other majors must pass an essay examination to meet the requirement).

Classes can be segregated by major, but since many communication problems in business and industry arise from specialists who can't communicate with specialists from other fields (engineers to social scientists, lawyers to small businesspeople, accountants to writers of annual reports), classes of mixed majors seem in my experience to be most successful.

One of my typical classes included sociology, journalism, microbiology, art education, textile manufacturing, history, government and politics, computer programming, life sciences, industrial technology, criminology, law enforcement, and communications majors. This mix of subject interests makes for a lively class because students learn about areas they may have had little interest in or knowledge of. The biggest advantage for both teachers and students, though, is that students must write for a non-expert audience when their peers in class are from widely different majors.

If these students practiced writer-centered writing, as in traditional English classes, they would probably learn to write for other experts in their respective fields. By adding the real-life experience of having to communicate with non-experts, an upper division writing class can offer a more marketable skill and teach students something practical and useful.

Teachers and Upper Division Writing

Getting teachers who are qualified by experience to teach upper division writing courses is not easy. Few people are trained to teach writing, since most lower division writing courses are taught by graduate students who learn on the job. (Schools like the University of Texas at Austin and Florida State University, which train graduate students to teach composition, are fewer than they should be. [3])

Sources of writing teachers for an experiential upper division course would include engineering writing, business writing, and technical writing departments, as well as those members of English departments who are interested in practical writing areas rather than literature. Other sources used at the University of Maryland and San Diego State University (SDSU), as well as other schools, are teachers of non-writing subjects who are interested in improving student writing in their areas.

For years before it became an upper division requirement, for example, SDSU required a course called "The Writing of History" of all history majors when they reached junior standing. In this course, students are taught how to write historical articles for academic and lay journals, for experts and non-experts. They learn by actually writing for different audiences rather than by reading good examples, since writing is an applied skill. Teachers familiar with this course would be able to teach other social science students similar writing techniques.

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At the University of Maryland, a meticulously planned program integrates faculty from English with other departments and outside instructors. Multiple sections of 27 different versions of Junior Composition are offered. Some classes are sorted by major; others combine various majors in Arts and Sciences. One-third of the 222 sections offered in 1980-81 were taught by English Department staff, and 37 percent more were taught by outside instructors hired by various departments specifically to teach Junior Composition. The remaining 30 percent of the sections were taught by instructors from history, foreign languages, journalism, music, art, philosophy, agriculture, botany, entomology, education, physics and astronomy, economics, geography, government and politics, and sociology departments. [1]

This mix of instructors indicates that Junior Composition classes at Maryland have a good chance of being taught as a practical writing course as they were intended to be. All of the available materials about course plans list practical writing assignments which stress the writer's paying particular attention to his/her intended audience, usually of nonexperts.

Designing Experiential and Practical Pre-professional Writing Assignments

The variety of students and teachers in a typical upper division writing course gives an excellent opportunity for creating a whole different type of writing assignment unbound by predictable writing class assignments. The upper division aspect of the course ensures that students have taken at least some courses in their majors and can thus be expected to write about their chosen professional field with some degree of knowledge.

The unusual mix of majors gives impetus to design non-English assignments, as does the professional bias of many of the instructors. The key as I see it is to require certain "professional writing" attributes of each piece of writing produced by students:

- naming a specific small (often an individual) audience;
- being able to list logical secondary readers;
- using visual organizational techniques such as itemizing, captions, and white space;
- using lie-flat covers where covers are needed, and labeling them professionally rather than with the academic "in partial fulfillment of the requirements for;"
- using graphics to enhance narrative discussion, and integrating these numbered and labeled illustrations, charts, and tables into the text very near where they are discussed; and
- writing as clearly as possible, using common words, short sentences and paragraphs, and keeping people and pronouns in to add interest unless third-person objectivity is absolutely necessary.

Given some instruction in the kind of professional format described above, students can fairly quickly produce papers that look like work writing rather than school writing. After a term's practice, they can also write papers that sound like work writing rather than school writing.

Possible assignments that simulate writing that might be done on the job depend to a large part on each student's major, of course, but the following list will give an idea of the type of nontraditional writing topic I have in mind and have had success with:

- 1) The Feasibility of Providing Aerobics Classes for Hecht's Department Store Employees--audience: Manager of a specific Hecht's store;
- 2) Training Procedures to Prepare Navy Medical Lab Employees for Mobilization--audience: Director of a Naval Reserve Lab;
- 3) The Advantages of Adding a K-9 Corps to the U.S. Marshall's Office--audience: Head of a local Marshall's office needing help detecting drugs;
- 6) Designing a Training Program for State Department Employees Being Sent to Muslim Countries--audience: Director, U.S. Foreign Services;
- 5) Choosing the Most Appropriate Camera Equipment for a Sportswriter--audience: Sports Editor, Washington Post
- 6) The Procedures for Selling Daily Aztec Advertising audience: Manager, a specific branch of the Chart House;
- 8) How the Veterans' Administration Office can Even Out its Weekly Office and Phone Workload--audience: Director, a specific V.A. office;
- 9) Loan Package for San Marcos Square--audience: bank officer being asked for development loan on a new shopping center; and
- 10) More Appropriate Form Letters for a Small Insurance Firm--audience: owner, specific small insurance firm.

The big difference between these topics and those commonly found in writing texts is that these topics solve problems that could actually exist for real firms (and sometimes did). These are not merely library research topics. Students are encouraged to use topics that they can also use on their jobs, or in other classes requiring practical research.

The ten topics I listed were all used by my students to produce professional pieces of writing. Not all of these students thought of themselves as good writers in the English class sense, and yet they were able to produce clear answers to real-life problems.

Shorter assignments that also use experiential topics rather than text topics can be written on informational as well as analytical topics, of course. Students can practice writing clearly for a non-expert audience on specific processes involved in their majors, such as how to use a microscope, how to write a sports story for a newspaper, how to sign on to the social sciences package on the computer, how to teach perspective to elementary school students, how to counsel alcoholics, or how to produce a plastic mold. As long as the professional writing attributes are required--attention to audience, visual organizational techniques, graphics, clear writing--students can learn to write for real audiences even if those audiences are simulated.

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More directly experiential topics can be gained from student jobs and internships, as the following possible jobs and likely topics indicate:

computer science majors -- data analysis for internships for the Air Force data center, the U.S. Treasury Department, the National Security Agency, Hewlett Packard;

social science majors -- counseling internships for Social Security Administration, County Hospital, Community Ministry Food Stamp Outreach, Association for Retarded Citizens; and

business students -- marketing internships for an international study group, resource management for American Rivers Conservation Council, finance and marketing for county government, assistants for the U.S. Customs Service, sales internships for private firms.

Internships are usually thought of as providing valuable work experience, but an added educational component can and should be to provide chances for writing for the real world of work. Experiential writing can be integrated into these jobs as well.

Recommendations

Any required writing courses can help students once they are close enough to graduation to see the value of communication skills on the job. A writing class that integrates professional writing experience with attention to writing skills needed on any job can be of great value to students who plan to work after graduation. Ideally, students should get on- the-job experience in school through internships, but since all students can't share this advantage, advanced writing courses should at least allow students to practice the job skill of professional writing, freeing them for applying their theoretical knowledge of their majors when first on the job. First jobs in particular have enough new things to assimilate without having to learn basic business writing techniques also.

Since businesses expect students to be able to communicate as well as practice their field, schools need to teach as much practical communication as possible. Experiential writing classes giving simulations of real life writing experiences can help prepare students for the jobs they will hold later.

REFERENCES

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