



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN, WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Making Basic Composition Relevant

One of the first things I discovered in teaching basic composition to technical students was that they do not like to do two things: read and write. Consequently, the students who enroll in basic composition classes are not motivated. They enroll because they have to be there as part of a technical or vocational degree program. As a result, one of the most frequent comments I hear is, "I don't need to know how to do this (write) to twist bolts." That attitude was responsible for the changes that took place in the way I teach my basic writing classes; it also requires me to question each class so I can know what students believe to be relevant and try to work that relevance into writing assignments.

Background Information

As a rule, students in my basic composition classes have been exposed to writing classes in which they were asked to keep journals, read articles and short stories, and write essays over abstract ideas or topics which did not interest them. In addition, they were exposed to grammar taught in isolation, reading exercises, and sentence exercises which did not relate to their field of study or interests. Is it any wonder that my writing students could not see any relevance to what they were doing?

After about six weeks into the first trimester that I taught basic composition, my students balked at what they were doing and complained. One student commented, "We've just been through four years of high school and this kind of stuff, can't we do something that's useful and a little more grown-up?" Upon hearing that, I stopped the class and a lively discussion ensued about what kinds of writing these students could use. With students studying such diverse fields as air conditioning and refrigeration; culinary arts; automotive technology; diesel and heavy equipment; jewelry technology; and shoe, boot, and saddle, the common factor seemed to be business or technical writing; the other common factor, which was missing, was relevance.

My initial argument to students was that writing skills are transferable. They did not buy into that, however; and after serious consideration, neither did I.

From those first discussions about relevance and the writing process, which included computer usage, came two major writing assignments: the Fact-Finding Assignment and the Mini-Business Plan. Both of these assignments are aimed at technical students and their learning about why they should be in a writing class. As a change from the typical composition assignments, students take their writing more seriously; students who do not take their writing seriously are usually those who would not take any form of writing assignment seriously. Such negatives aside, I have seen dramatic changes in students' attitudes toward writing.

Fact-Finding Assignment

Since students want relevance, I tell them to inquire within their respective departments about the types of writing they will be required to do in their degree program and on the job. They are to identify the writing they will be expected to do as they move through the ranks of a company or business.

In order to make the assignment easier for students to write and easier for me to read and evaluate, I provide a handout of a technical writing format, complete with headings and descriptions of the information to be included under each. Organization is fairly simple, but effective. Then following the technical writing format, I give students five basic headings that they must use: introduction, writing at school, writing at work, discussion, and conclusion. They may also use bulleted lists to show the types of writing they will need to do at school and work. Although most students prefer to use the headings I give, they can modify them, or write their own headings if they have information which needs to be discussed separately.

One of the most important parts of the assignment is in the discussion section. Students are to explain how they think my writing class is preparing them for what they have discovered about the forms of writing they may need to know. I tell students to critique how the class is relevant to them and their career goals and to offer suggestions for improvement.

In the conclusion section, students are to summarize the types of writing they think they need most, possible assignments, and how changing the class would benefit



them and other students in their degree programs. Most students have definite ideas about what should be changed, and some students have even suggested different textbooks or made comments about the type of textbook they think would best suit them. All of the students who complete this assignment know that they have a better idea about what goes on in their field of study—and even if their programs do not require much writing, at least they get to write about something which is relevant to them.

The Mini-Business Plan

This writing assignment requires students to explain how they would set up their own business. This downsized version does not go into all the details of a business plan written in a small business management class. However, it does force students to use sufficient details to explain themselves. Students follow the typical business plan format as described in small business management textbooks. Using a technical writing format, students write a statement of purpose, and describe the company, the location, the products and services they will provide, describe how they plan to market their products/services, and identify the number of people who will be employed.

As preparation for the business plan assignment, my class attends a small business management class on the day the instructor begins work on business plans. This introductory information gives my writing students a better background about the importance of a well-written plan, and hearing it from someone other than the English teacher makes more of an impression. As an added incentive, students who are enrolled in the basic composition class may use their business plans later in the small business management class; likewise, those students who are co-enrolled can use the assignment in both classes.

Computer Usage

Many basic composition students did not plan on using computers; at first, they were hesitant. By using an LCD panel and overhead projector hooked up to a computer, however, I was able to help students work their way through the basic word processing program. Once they found that they could successfully use the computers, they took their writing more seriously—certainly more seriously than before. One student commented that he had always hated writing because he was such a poor speller; but now that he could use the spell-check, he thought his ideas were much easier to put on paper. As a result, I planned extra class time on the computers and encouraged students to use the

computer room in their spare time. The quality and quantity of their writing increased considerably. Response to current writing assignments was also more enthusiastic than to previous assignments which had a traditional composition focus.

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