



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Writing Relevance: The Role of the Assignment

Several years ago when I decided to change careers and become a college writing teacher, I was faced with the task of designing assignments. I remembered as an undergraduate thinking that many of the topics instructors thought were important only touched the lives of the students tangentially and temporarily, if at all. These academic assignments attempted to get students to write so-called academic prose for poorly conceived audiences on subjects about which students had opinions but little information or interest.

Resolving to avoid these assignments at all costs, I began searching for improvements. I discovered that when academic instructors sought subjects from outside the humanities—for instance, in the general news media—these subjects tended to reflect the values or interest of the instructors. Additionally, these assignments avoided or were critical of topics that might well have been of greater interest to students. Last, when instructors did choose assignments on subjects outside of the humanities, the assignments frequently were phrased so abstractly that I had to wonder how well the instructors understood the topics. One especially poor assignment compelled students to write on the subject of leadership, using a ten-year-old, poorly written, and extremely superficial *Newsweek* article. The vaguely worded prompt required students to defend their opinions on an abstract level that appeared to be an impossible challenge for everyone—the instructor and students, especially the younger students.

My background in business, technology, and government convinced me that these writing assignments not only lacked immediate relevance for the students but, more importantly, did not prepare them for anything but the rather narrow and temporary experience of writing for academicians. Therefore, I set about to create assignments that would engage students as well as (1) prepare them for the writing of academic argument, which was, after all, the immediate task at hand; (2) prepare them for the types of writing situations that they would face for the rest of their lives; and (3) give them a sense of the relationship between audience, purpose, and self, the facts which combine to create proper tone and voice—all lacking in their writing.

What evolved was a series of situational and sequential writing assignments designed to take advantage of both current research about the value of writing as a process—including heavy emphasis on drafting, collaboration, peer review, and revision—and classical rhetoric with its emphasis on the forms of presentation. I began with realistic and somewhat controversial situations, mainly based on editorials or letters-to-the-editor from one of the local newspapers. Next, I created stories from them, often beginning with a piece of text, but adding several voices (or characters) to give the various sides of the issue. In order to keep the situations from becoming too ponderous and to provoke some humorous responses, I gave comic names to some of the characters—Peggy Mole and Delbert Moron, for instance—and had them fit comically stereotyped models such as disinterested bureaucrats or self-absorbed public officials. Finally, I presented a problem that personally affected the writers and asked them to frame a response.

One situation, for instance, was derived from a letter-to-the-editor complaining about high school students leaving school for “open lunch” to “drive around, race their cars, and smoke dope.” The real letter was highly inflammatory; I copied it very closely, going on, however, to create a scenario that was the result of an outcry from the community for a closed-campus lunch hour. The result—and the reason for the writing assignment—was that the board of education was to consider the issue, and it was the writer’s task to take one of three possible positions and convey it to the board. The other characters quoted in this assignment were the members of the board, all of whom were highly stereotyped and had agendas—one member, for instance, was the owner of a fast food restaurant. Such an assignment engaged the students and compelled them to be successful in convincing the board to vote their way.

Another assignment concerned a heavy metal group, called Human Sacrifice, slated to appear in the students’ hometown, the mythical city of Euphoria, Kansas. At the eleventh hour, the lyrics of one of their songs created a controversy among the townspeople, several of whom were calling for the concert to be canceled.



The lyrics, which I invented, had some suggestive imagery but essentially were nonsense. The voices (characters) that appeared in this assignment included a local minister, the newspaper, an ACLU attorney, the self-proclaimed head of a concerned parents group, and the band's lead singer, Maxxi Probe. The assignment was to write to the recreation commission, which was meeting to discuss whether to cancel the band's permit to play. The issues the students generated included freedom of speech, censorship in general, youth-bashing, and hero-worship of entertainers and athletes.

Another assignment concerned the proposed opening of a battery manufacturing company adjacent to the writer's home in Euphoria. The characters in the assignment included the city's economic development director, the city commission, the plant owner, and various state and federal bureaucrats. Although students were allowed to take any position they wanted, as threatened property owners they were compelled to become their own advocates, and their success once again depended on adopting appropriate strategies and voices to achieve whatever specific goals they designed. I pointed out that inflammatory rhetoric, personal attacks, and highly abstract evocations

would not be helpful. The most successful essays addressed the technical, the political, and the economic issues engendered by the assignment and explored workable compromises and solutions.

Some assignments are suited to beginning writers and others to the more advanced, but all follow essentially the same format that is adaptable to almost any discipline. For example, pointed hypotheticals would be especially applicable to writing in technical and business fields, or to writing-across-the-curriculum programs. Whatever the field, students are able to engage in writing situations on a personal level while adopting the objective stance necessary for both real-world credibility and academic writing. They arrive at this point because they have experienced writing with a definite purpose for a well-defined audience, and they have developed confidence in their ability to adopt a measured, mature voice.

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International Business Communications Project

Changes taking place in business and industry have created a need for changes in educational processes and curricula. In designing a new course in Professional Communications, we took a strong look at the concept of a team-centered workforce. In addition to standard business letter, memorandum, and report writing skills, students needed oral communications skills—speaking and listening in meetings, presentations, and daily communication—as well as problem-solving and team-building skills.

Students also needed to see the world as a global economy, to communicate and work with individuals of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The area around Piedmont Technical College is populated with such diverse industries as Sara Lee Knit Products, Monsato, Fuji, Pirelli, Kemet, Velux, Capsugel, Greenwood Mills, Pro Med, Kaiser Aluminum, Grede Foundry, Torrington, and Walbar Metals, to name a few. These companies are heavily involved in the global economy and have a need for associates who can address and meet the challenges it poses.

We worked hard to incorporate all industry needs in this course by including a team project requiring a mock business transaction. During the semester-long project,

the teams select their countries, divide the work, and research the values, cultural beliefs, business practices, and other matters which would aid in doing business with another culture. The final product is a research-based written and oral presentation.

At first, some of the students are reluctant to try team projects, but most of the grades in such projects are higher than the student's individual grades. (An unspoken commitment is that a team grade will never lower an individual student's grade). The students gain skills in listening, speaking, team-building, problem solving, documentation, collaborative learning, research, cultural diversity, creating visual aids, proof-reading, report writing, and presenting in groups.

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