



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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LEAPFROG: INTEGRATING REVISION AND RESEARCH INTO COLLEGE WRITING

To integrate revision and research into English Composition, I experimented with a “leapfrog” approach that involves assigning five papers, two of which asked students to revise a previous paper and to incorporate research into it. Assignment Three was a revision of Assignment One, and Assignment Four was a revision of Assignment Two—hence “leapfrog.” Assignment Five stands alone.

Texts

The two required texts for this course were Klosterman’s *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, and Hacker’s *A Writer’s Reference*.

Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs proved very popular, largely because Klosterman covers a range of topics that are relevant to students’ lives. Klosterman’s informal, non-academic approach to writing, moreover, afforded me the opportunity to discuss audience and purpose.

A Writer’s Reference proved invaluable with respect to instructing students on the writing process. Early in the semester, I supplemented in-class discussion of such topics as the writing process, reading actively, and formulating a thesis. As the semester progressed, I used Hacker to furnish students with information on summarizing and quoting, using in-text citations, and compiling a Works Cited list.

Unit One

During the first weeks of the semester, I focused on reading critically and developing a strong thesis. The somewhat nebulous writing style that Klosterman uses in *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* proved very helpful in approaching both of these issues. Several class discussions revolved around figuring out what, exactly, Klosterman was arguing in each chapter and dovetailed effectively into developing a strong thesis.

Clearly, Klosterman was arguing *something* in his essays—yet students grew somewhat frustrated at

pinning down a single, specific argument in each chapter. Using students’ frustration as a starting point, I drew a distinction between what the casual reader of a general-interest magazine might want from a text and what a professor might want. More to the point, I asked whether an English professor with upwards of 100 papers to grade in a given week would rather read several paragraphs before figuring out the point or find the point stated concisely and clearly in the opening paragraph.

Lessons on developing a strong thesis built on Hacker’s discussion of the subject. She suggests that constructing an effective argument is akin to joining a conversation with other readers and writers; as such, an opening paragraph should establish the relevance of topic, present different ways of looking at that topic, and clearly state the author’s position on the topic. She offers instruction on supporting the claims of an author’s thesis through the use of facts and statistics, examples and illustration, and expert opinion, and proposes anticipating objections, countering opposing arguments, and building common ground.

I instructed students to employ many of Hacker’s strategies, but I allowed the use of expert opinion to remain optional. If students had learned to find and cite sources in previous English courses, then they were welcome to do so with this assignment, but research was not a requirement.

Unit Two

This unit focused on responding to the work of a single author. Because this involved the use of information found in a text, I covered the basics of summarizing, quoting, providing in-text citations, and compiling a Works Cited page; and I addressed any grammar, spelling, punctuation, or usage errors that appeared in significant numbers in the first.

Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs provided fodder for discussion. I shifted the conversation toward the author’s arguments and how he supported them. Did students agree or disagree with his positions? Where did they think his arguments were weak? How might they modify his position on a given topic? How might



they build on one of his arguments, or use it to explain something else?

In addition to discussing *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* essays, I assigned and discussed readings from *A Writer's Reference* to familiarize students with basic documentation—strong instruction related to using sources, including information on summarizing, limiting the use of direct quotations, providing sufficient context for quotations, and providing citations for any information taken from outside sources.

I reviewed the proper format of a Works Cited page, instructing the students to consult *A Writer's Reference* for citing specific types of sources from various media. Failure to cite even one source would result in a failing grade for the assignment.

Unit Three

By this point in the semester, I had graded Assignment One, so students had a sense of the parts of their papers that needed work. The range of issues that students had to address with regard to their papers, moreover, was fairly wide. Some papers lacked strong arguments, some lacked development and support, some were disorganized at the paragraph level, and some were completely disorganized. I focused on revision and research.

I met with students individually to discuss strategies for revising papers, stressed that I did not want them to merely correct any grammar and punctuation problems I may have pointed out in their essays. In order to pass, the students had to submit papers that demonstrated substantial improvement over what we could now call a first draft.

In addition to pointing out areas where students needed to improve mechanics, my comments pointed to places where their arguments might be strengthened by the addition of outside information. Along similar lines, I started talking to students about how to evaluate sources. To reinforce Hacker's treatment of the research process, I invited a librarian to instruct students on the information resources available to them in our library.

Considering that a major aspect of this unit was revision, I discussed student papers. In some instances, I focused entirely on an opening paragraph so that students could discuss ways in which the paragraph might be improved in terms of organization, accuracy, and viable argument. In others, I would ask them to examine an entire paper, which allowed us to shift the focus of our discussion to more global issues. Regardless of whether our discussions focused on a paragraph or an entire paper, inevitably they covered sentence-level issues. At the end of the unit, I assigned a paper in which students had to integrate research into a new

draft of Assignment One as part of a revision process that also included all of the aspects of revision outlined previously.

Unit Four

Unit Four focused largely on revision and research. In-class discussions revolved around *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, continued examination of student papers, and frequent review of issues surrounding research and documentation. A number of the students were becoming increasingly engaged in the writing process, and I allowed their questions and concerns regarding their papers to direct our in-class discussions. The assignment asked students to revise the paper they had written after Unit Two and to integrate research into that paper.

Unit Five

The semester's final unit consisted largely of reviewing the concepts that we had covered in class: developing a strong thesis, providing support for the thesis, organizing the paper, performing research, and citing sources. Student papers were central to this review. We continued to read and discuss *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. The final assignment was to incorporate all of the steps of the writing process that we had covered in previous units—including drafting, revising, and incorporating outside information—to produce a research paper responding to one of Klosterman's essays.

Results and Application in Other Courses

The majority of students learned to use and document sources well. Perhaps more significantly, I noticed that their approach to revision went far beyond the simple corrections of spelling and punctuation errors that I had come to expect in previous semesters. Rather, they used the research process as an opportunity to make significant changes to their work. Moreover, while the texts I used certainly fostered student engagement, the leapfrog strategy can be employed in most disciplines.

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