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Capstone Project

In teaching Composition 101 to freshmen in college, teachers often run into difficulty actually getting students to learn how to write better. I believe that the use of intense, short, structured writing exercises may help with this problem. These activities require students to write in certain ways that foster thought and result in the use of composition processes they are not particularly accustomed to. Therefore, the set parameters require them to become more proficient in the various modes of thinking, and therefore, to become more proficient in their writing.

To show how an exercise such as this might work, let's look at a typical writing exercise, without any modifications. Usually, teachers give prompts for student responses to get them writing such as, "The tax payers of Minnesota should not have to pay for a stadium that not every citizen would use." Immediately, students might agree or disagree with this statement, and could write their response to it in a paragraph. This would be an effective writing exercise, but how could we make their time and effort even more effective, and more interesting?

What I use instead is a type of focused collaboration. Each student writes a claim as a response to the prompt. Then, the students get up from their chairs and move to the computer to their right, and read the sentence written by their neighbors. The next sentence that follows the initial statement is then written, but it must begin with a word such as "However," which is followed by a comma. So whether the student agrees or disagrees with the first statement, the sentence that follows this connector, *however*, only allows for one train of thought. All of the

following sentences after the initial response use these connectors, or in this case, conjunctive adverbs like *however* and *therefore*, and are numbered on the board before students begin writing.

I call this exercise “Musical Chair Sentences” when computers are involved, or simply “Pass the Sentence” in a regular classroom. Currently in my classroom, I have four tables of six computer stations each. Based on other classes without tables and stations, though, I’ve found this exercise works well with three to six participants per paragraph. And, of course, the exercise can be easily modified. The various amounts of interaction all allow for students to interact with as many continuous paragraphs as there are students in a group. Furthermore, all paragraphs are in different stages, and the result from any group is several cohesive paragraphs, developed from individually-tailored sentences, with each paragraph containing a contribution from each student in a group. Here is one of the results of the actual exercise taken from one table of six, but this time, the topic was chosen by a student, and included a Word of the Day, which I chose. The WOD is *egregious*, and they were required to use it once in each sentence:

1. The secretary made an egregious error when she called her boss by the wrong name.
2. However, despite this egregious error her boss was surprisingly not upset.
3. Therefore, she did not fall victim to the egregious act of getting fired.
4. But, in order to make up for her mistake, she was asked to perform egregious acts.
5. Thus, she had the egregious act of cleaning the bathrooms every other day.
6. Yet she did not mind this egregious act because it could have been worse.

This exercise taught them many different things at once, and remained loose enough for them to have a good time, laugh a little, and be creative. And, as surprisingly cohesive as this paragraph is, it is important to remember that, when looking at the results, the exercise is a result of six students' work combined.

The first concept students learn in a typical exercise such as the one above is the use of a new word. This is one of many variables that can be left out or inserted into each exercise according to the particular needs of the class, as we will see later. From the sheer repetition of a word, and that they must read it and use it six times each, students are more apt to remember the word in the future. I also revisit these words in subsequent weeks to encourage long term memory. The second concept students learn is how shape what they want to say, but still adhere to the direction that the transitional words (coordinating conjunctives and conjunctive adverbs) push them in. Whatever comes after a word such as *yet* or *but* must be worded in a certain way. Because the students are thus required to say something with one train of thought in mind, their responses must be written with aforethought, and thinking is a wonderful thing to get students to do before they write! The third concept is tied in with the second, for not only do they have to think in a certain way, they still must make each sentence tie in with the preceding sentence, and the entire paragraph. Therefore, they are synthesizing two pieces of information—the previous sentence and the new transitional word—with a third, their own idea, in order to make a logical following sentence. The fourth concept they learn is the use and reuse of the conjunctives. Words such as *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*, *therefore*, and *however* function not only as sentence and paragraph connectors, which largely help with clear and cohesive writing, but also function as thought provoking words, which help them think in different ways, as stated previously.

Finally, students come away from these exercises thinking that they played a game and that they had fun. What they do not realize is that they learned many critical thinking and writing skills that are applicable to their current and future compositions. In my opinion, learning that involves thinking and remains fun is the best type of learning. One can observe this type of activity when children are at play. They have loads of fun, yet learn important life skills at the same time, such as getting along with others, and how to share.

There are very many vectors an instructor can add or omit from this exercise to make it more interesting or varied for different types of learners. First, as stated before, different Words of the Day can be used, and the words chosen can fit students at any level. Second, in place of the transitional words, the instructor can use phrases that are more complex, or even sentences with commas in the middle, with words such as *which* or *but* that go after them. For example, “The problem with [...] is [...], which is [...].” All they need to do is fill in the blanks. A follow up to this sentence might be, “One solution to this problem is [...], but [...].” This makes them focus on complex sentences if they need work in that area. Third, the idea of Musical Chair Sentences can be made into Musical Chair Paragraphs as well. In this form, the students must write a paragraph involving whatever vectors the instructor chooses, or the students choose. Since these are paragraphs they are composing, the number of students involved when completing a paper should be three or four. A good example of this is when I had the students pick a person, place, and thing, of their choice. They chose a pickle monster, a pickle factory, and a class. In this case, they worked on two-part transition sentences, which tie in the previous paragraph and the coming paragraph, and they come at the beginning of every paragraph. The two vectors I chose for this exercise were: 1) Each paragraph needed to address one of the three

ideas; and 2) Each paragraph after the initial paragraph needs a transition. Here is what three different students came up with:

All of the children in Mr. Smith's class were excited for today. It was the day that they would be going on their field trip to the pickle factory. They all arrived early with their bag lunches, eager for the day to get started.

After arriving at the pickle factory one of the teachers realized that a student was missing. She quickly found the manager of the pickle factory and told him the horrible news. They started a search party for him and the whole factory was on look out for the small boy.

All work came to a halt as the entire fleet of factory workers searched for the missing boy. Men and women both scoured every corner of the large building, hoping to find some sign of the child's whereabouts. Of those who went alone, one unfortunate worker happened upon what the boy had become: a giant pickle monster.

This example is, once again, very funny, but very well written. It is apparent that my students learned a great deal about transitions as well as connecting ideas. The benefits from both student examples have shown in their graded essays. I have noticed they have begun to use coordinating conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs more, and correctly. Since getting them to write better is the goal of the exercises, then this is a significant accomplishment. Also, during my midterm feedback, I received responses such as: "I like the exercises. They make us think on our feet," and, "It's a fun class." I believe that learning and having fun can go together, not always, but they can. If I can achieve a boost in knowledge with a subject that by the masses is particularly thought of as boring, then this is also a significant accomplishment.