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The No-Draft Proposal Essay A Lesson and Assignment Design for English 101

Overview & Rationale

As many Comp 101 instructors do, I assign and execute lesson plans in a fairly standard and predictable way. For each ‘big’ essay assignment, I teach using short lectures, in-class writing assignments, and I assign a rough draft of the essay which I correct and comment on all before the final graded essay is handed in. The ultimate goal is to expose students to a variety of writing applications which will pop up again and again as their college careers progress.

But a curious phenomenon develops between correcting the rough draft of the essay and reading the final draft: the only changes made to the draft are directly related to the comments I make on the draft. Now I realize this may sound like a no-brainer, since students only look for the ‘red ink’ on a draft, but the problem I find with that is I don’t see a student learning only by correcting the errors I point out. For example, if I mark a misspelled word, the change is made no problem. However, if I make a comment suggesting a logic-error or mechanical-error within a paragraph, many students either disregard the comment or delete the majority of the paragraph without seeing the effect it has on the rest of the essay.

So I decided I would design an assignment where there would be no rough-draft which I corrected, instead there would only be a final draft which carried a significant percentage of the final grade. However, my plan was not to simply leave my students in the dark or let them flounder alone. Instead, this assignment would be built around several in-class workshops designed to build confidence in the writer’s own abilities as well as focus on an intensive peer-review workshop meant to elicit outside comments on the essay (much like comments I would make on a draft).

The Assignment

The assignment I decided to test my design with was an explanatory synthesis essay built around gathering and utilizing outside source materials. Using Bruce Ballenger’s *The Curious Writer* as a class text, the easiest way I felt to incorporate sources was by turning the synthesis essay into a Proposal/Problem and Solution essay with a research component emphasis. The essay was built around utilizing outside material to discuss a ‘problem’ and possible ‘solutions’ offered by different appropriate and credible sources.

The essay held a point total of 150 points, or roughly 15% of the final grade, a figure which seemed to make my students a little wary from the start of the assignment.

In-Class Exercises & Lecture Topics

As I mentioned, my goal was not to hang my students out to dry or tell them to fend for themselves, rather I developed a series of short lectures interspersed with intensive in-class writing exercises. My own theory about class lectures is an instructor has only about a ten-minute window to pass along the most valuable information possible before students begin to drift away, so the quicker I could move from talking to them writing with hands-on applications for the material the better.

My lectures and in-class writing exercises included topics such as:

- Defining Problems of Consequence
- Causation and Reasoning
- Logical Fallacies and Critical Reading Development
- Effective Summary, Paraphrase, and direct Quotation of Source Material
- A Detailed Library and On-Line Database Instruction Session
- MLA In-Text Documentation
- MLA Work Cited Page Documentation
- Effective Organization and Application of Source Material
- Effective Transitional Phrases and Statements

I also required a brief out of class conference from each student, which I know most appreciated. By the end of the two and half weeks spent working on this assignment, my students knew the bar had been set pretty high.

The Mega Peer Review Workshop

My ultimate goal throughout the class has always been to help my students gain confidence in their own writing as well as recognize effective writing from their peers. I designed an intense and structured peer-review workshop which I intended to serve as a way for my students to get feedback on the drafts they had been working on. Given a set of specific question to answer, specific portions of text to mark using various colors from the 'highlight' function on MS Word, and careful examination of the use of sources within the essay, the workshop design essentially had each student commenting in the same way I would have had I accepted drafts.

Conclusion and Assessment

After reviewing the final drafts and examining the comments students made on their partner's draft, I think the lesson design went over fairly well. The writing of the drafts had improved in many of the essays, however for others I saw less attention to grammar and mechanics. I can attribute this to either the student not proofreading carefully before handing in the final, or possibly not reading the comments from the peer-review partner, or perhaps the peer-review partner in fact didn't catch the mistakes to begin with. But I feel the poor results were far outweighed by the fine writing that many of my students were able to produce.

The response from the students was a mixed bag as well; some got a lot out of the assignment, others absolutely hated the idea of someone other than a teacher reading their work. I knew that this outcome was going to be a possibility, but I do feel that the experience was beneficial in that each student was forced to critically read and utilize their source material. By the time the peer-review workshop was assigned, the majority of their essays had already been written in class thanks to our in-class workshops, but it was up to the individual student to connect each topic using their own best judgment. I feel that most gained a better understanding of their own writing process through this assignment, and my hope is it will help them throughout the rest of their educational career.

The element of this design I was most elated and surprised with was the amount of attention most paid during the peer-review workshop. Most of my students spent a great deal of time and energy reading and commenting on their partner's work, taking the time to consider everything being said and critically analyze the effectiveness of the essay.

Example Peer-Review Assignment Sheet

Comp 101 Sec 19
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Proposal Peer Review

Because I am not commenting on your rough draft, I feel it will be very helpful for you to get some feedback from your fellow classmates before submitting a final draft to me. I see a great value in student-to-student workshops, I know that many times comments you give to a fellow classmate are more helpful than comments I make. I hope you all take this opportunity to read your partners work closely and carefully—your comments, whether positive or negative, are important and do matter. Likewise, I hope any comments your partner makes on your essay you read and consider before submitting the final draft.

Instructions

First, in big bold letters, type **Reviewed by YOUR NAME** at the top of the page. I would like you to read your partners essay all the way through, line for line, and familiarize yourself with the topic and information. Pay special attention to the use of outside information used, the way it is cited in-text, and also how the topic sentences work to backup the thesis. Make note of any spelling or grammatical errors you see, as well as areas or topics which sound as if they don't follow the logical pattern of Problem—Cause—Solution.

After you have read the essay through once, you will read the essay again and use the **highlight** function from the toolbar at the top of the screen (upper right hand corner, small 'marker' icon) to identify certain parts of the essay in the following way:

1. Highlight the entire thesis statement in pink
2. Highlight each new topic sentence in red
3. Within each separate paragraph, highlight the first source used in light-blue, and highlight the second source used in green, and highlight each additional source used in yellow, blue, and grey.

Do this throughout the entire essay. Be sure to highlight the entire sentence where the thesis statement, topic sentence, or source material is used. Do not highlight any sentence that is personal opinion or a transition statement. After you have finished, look at the essay as a whole—how much of the essay have you highlighted? How many different colors did you use in each paragraph—is there a significant amount of information synthesis in each paragraph (required 2 sources or more used per topic/paragraph)?

Next, go through the essay and add comments using the ‘comment’ function. To add a comment, move the blinking-cursor to the end of the paragraph or sentence where you want make a comment, use the mouse to scroll down the Insert menu and click on the Comment icon. When you click on the Comment icon, a balloon will pop up along the side of the screen and you can type out any comment you would like to make. These comments can be positive and critical, because all comments are helpful. I would like for you to comment on all of the following ideas/elements:

1. How does the essay begin—how does the author orientate the reader to the subject? Notice the voice and verbal tense of the writing—is this essay written in 3rd person voice (as required for the assignment)? If not, can you give your partner hints or ideas of how to correct the problem?
2. Thesis statement—is it effective? Is the thesis statement broad enough to justify the discussion around it? Does the thesis statement clue a reader in to the general topics discussed throughout the essay? If so, why is it successful? If the thesis doesn't flow with the information in the body of the essay, what can you suggest to help focus the thesis?
3. Looking at the first topic discussed after the introduction, what do you think of where the author decided to begin the ‘body’ of the essay? Detail if you can see the logic in beginning with either background or causation of this issue, and describe what you think of the information offered in this topic. Does the outside information cited work to back up the topic sentence—does it sound rational, logical, unbiased and credible? Comment on your reaction to the material presented.
4. Throughout the rest of the essay, comment on each new topic sentence and new idea presented—how do these new ideas work to detail the problem at hand and possible solutions? How does each new topic flow from the one previous—it each new topic discussed a logical and balanced step from the topic which preceded it? If so, explain why. If not, explain why you don't see the logical connection between topics.

5. Look at the effect of the sources used—are the sources used within each topic relevant to each other, does your partner work to show the connections of ideas from different sources? Does your partner work to use source material that accurately and concisely backs up the larger topic at hand—meaning, are the quotes, paraphrases, and summaries of material helpful in gaining a better understanding of the issue? Explain in detail where you see good information and where you see information that could use clarification.
6. Throughout the entire essay, comment on any grammatical, organizational, or spelling errors you see. Read through the essay carefully—help your partner smooth out any logical inconsistencies or grammatical errors they may have missed.
7. Finally, comment on the essay as a whole—what did you think? What was the most interesting thing you learned by reading this essay? Looking at the different ways sources were used throughout the essay, can you suggest any places where more information can be inserted to help elaborate on the issue?