

Writing and Belonging to the College Community: A Direct Connection

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Introduction

During my first weeks of college I remember walking through the campus and looking down at the concrete walks wishing I knew where the gum patterns were, those everlasting spots on the walkways formed by pieces of already chewed gum. I made a prediction that by the time I knew where the gray, gum-blobs were on my most frequently traveled routes I would feel “at home”; I would feel like I belonged at this college.

Wanting to “belong” is one of the greatest challenges facing our first-year students. Especially at Plymouth State, where many are first-generation college students, it is helpful if we evaluate our own teaching by asking ourselves, How is my teaching fostering the students’ sense of belonging to the college?

While teaching two entry-level United States History classes this fall, I inadvertently stumbled upon an answer to this question: the teaching of writing has a direct and positive impact on a student’s sense of belonging. By creating a very structured writing component that focuses upon mastering a basic writing tool, the five paragraph analytical essay, I found that students made connections to each other, to me, and most importantly, left feeling they had gained

an academic tool that would help them succeed in future courses. It is this last observation that is most critical, the idea that if first-year students conclude an entry-level course with skills that will help them succeed academically they will have moved closer toward that goal of becoming members of the college community.

Writing and Belonging

My premise that writing increases the students' sense of belonging begins with the passing back of graded papers. Requiring drafts and allowing for rewrites of writing assignments can be difficult in terms of the time commitment required, (I have included some helpful hints to manage the grading end of things later in this article) but the advantage of many assignments begins with the fact that you have to hand back a lot of papers. In so doing, I learned the names of my students and more importantly they found out that I knew their names. Taking role makes students accountable, but knowing their names makes them feel counted! I have a theory that if I learn their names I will increase their attendance and their subsequent success in the course. It is tough to have a control group for this one but logic lends itself to the argument that if a student walks in and is greeted by name they can presume that showing up to class matters.

Beyond name recognition, papers insure that a dialogue can develop between professor and first-year student—a dialogue that is not guaranteed if one relies solely on tests. One very earnest student I had, Wes, stopped by my desk after class early in the semester to show me a draft of his first opening paragraph. He qualified the paragraph by saying that he hadn't written anything for almost six months and had great trepidation. Wes continued this pattern of "checking in" around his writing. I could expect him to come at least every third office hour with something to run by me. He was not the only one. A steady stream of "checkerinners"

reliably appeared at office hours. Our discussions were about writing and school and work and sports. It was an ad hoc community that formed two days a week from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Writing also lends itself to community building among the students. One afternoon I found ten students in my office working on papers. Out of necessity we pooled our energies and began randomly and spontaneously reading opening paragraphs out loud and giving feedback. The brainstorming was fun and instructive but nothing rivaled the fun of all of us squashing into a little space and talking about writing and United States history. It was one of those moments that almost felt “staged”; the college catalog photographer was going to peer in at any moment and snap a shot of “engaged college students working together”; but it was for real.

Another issue in terms of being “known” is the crucial concept that first-year students come to us with a wide range of skills. Individualized instruction around writing meets students where they are and begins the process of getting them where they need to be to succeed in college. One student, Rick, was beginning college at the age of twenty-one after breezing through high school doing the minimal and then working for three years. Work in the outside world had convinced him he needed a college degree, but he was initially unable to translate that desire for a degree into work habits that would lead to attaining one. His first paper was handwritten—not typed—and provided no citations from the course readings. I would not grade it. He came to office hours and I outlined for him his task: to have the next draft show some discipline. Structure, citations and accountability were going to be expected of him. The next draft was better, not miraculous. The second and third papers of the semester were better still, not to mention typed! This young man is an example of a first-year student who was ready to allow college academic life to let him drown in his own sea of shortcuts. Failing a test would have let him off the hook, but having to write a very structured piece that would not be graded

until it met a certain threshold, hooked him.

My courses centered around one kind of writing, the five paragraph analytical essay. Remaining very focused on one kind of writing could on the surface appear to work against the tide of individualized instruction, but I found this not to be the case. By requiring a particular kind of essay, I could stress and emphasize different aspects of that essay's style with different students. For example, Rob's thesis was simplistic and missed an opportunity to analyze the situation. That became his task. Meanwhile another student, Carrie, handed in a paper with clear examples of plagiarism because she failed to use quotation marks properly. Her task became learning proper citations. Still another student, Monica, wrote convoluted sentences such as this in her first paper: "The evolution of a young nation changed interests to expand into foreign territories gained by a disregard to create a powerful nation." Improving sentence structure and clarity became the focus of her writing efforts.

The advantage of keeping to one kind of writing throughout the course was that it allowed for some variation in questions and emphasis while at the same time giving structure and consistency to the course. First-year students need both structure and consistency, and as the evaluator of these writing assignments one kind of essay was more manageable for me. I created the structure by relying on the five paragraph essay and grading these assignments using a rubric. An example of one such rubric is shown on the next page.

Evaluating Papers

A rubric essentially reads like a chart. If a thesis, for example, is "unique, offers analysis and makes connections" it is an "A" thesis and falls under the category of 90-100. There are other criteria spelled out for a "B" thesis and so forth. This rubric also spells out criteria by which to grade the main ideas and the

	90-100	80-89	70-79	60-69
Thesis	Precise, unique, offers analysis. Makes connections.	General. Needs more analysis. Clear. Not unique.	Describes but does not analyze.	No thesis. Inaccurate,
Main ideas	Original ideas. Supports the thesis. In the right order.	One main idea does not support the thesis.	More than one main idea does not support the thesis.	Main ideas are not provided.
Evidence	1)Evidence extracted from a variety of sources. 2)Several pieces of evidence for each idea. 3)Progresses logically. 4)Evidence is essential and original.	Of the four primary qualities for evidence the paper has three of the four.	Of the four primary qualities for evidence the paper has two of the four.	Evidence not provided adequately for any main idea. Evidence is inaccurate.

evidence. In order to correct a paper using this rubric, I would simply circle the category met by each of the three components of the essay. The actual grade would be in the range of the lowest category. For example, if a thesis was in the 80-89 range and the main ideas were there as well but the evidence only reached the threshold of the 70-79 range the paper's grade would fall somewhere between 70-79.

One of the greatest advantages of using a rubric in an entry level course with large numbers of students was that it cut down on grading time. I would circle the categories, write a few quick comments and grade it. The need for long narrative comments diminished.

The rubric has many practical advantages for the students as well. First, it allows the students and those helping the students, such as the writing center staff, to know your expectations. The rubric can change slightly from assignment to assignment but serves as a constant standard by which papers are graded.

Secondly, the rubric allows students to take control of their learning and aim for a grade. They can self-evaluate their papers and also use peer evaluations. This diminishes that feeling of many first-year students that the academic expectations of college are a mystery or unattainable. The rubric also gives us a common vocabulary. We could talk "main ideas," "supporting details," "thesis," and "evidence," and everyone is on the same page.

Thirdly, the rubric allows for consistency in grading. Students could see their improvement as their main ideas, for example, graduated from the 70's to the 80's. When correcting many essays as is necessary in an entry-level course, the rubric allowed me to remain consistent in my grading. I could correct for a while, take a break, and know when I returned, the criteria would remain consistent with the last batch of corrected papers.

Ways to Make It Work

It is all well and good to argue that teaching writing in entry level courses has many benefits; it is another thing to overcome the practical hurdles that stand in one's way of doing it. My experience has given me a few tricks of the trade that are worth passing on. First, drafts are important but I made the mistake of requiring too many of too great a length and got swamped by grading. I found that the following assignments for each paper were sufficient for giving feedback and reasonable to correct.

First, for every assignment I required a well-worked draft of the opening paragraph. I originally had the students write a complete draft, but I realized many did not put the effort into the draft knowing the grade received would not be final. I was, subsequently, spending a lot of effort that was unmatched by theirs. I also discovered that the opening paragraph more often than not was very telling about how well the paper was written. Finally, requiring a draft of the opening paragraph sent the message in actions as well as words to the student that the opening paragraph is critical and worth extra time, effort and thought.

The second part of each assignment was the final paper. I created a set of guidelines for final papers that included requirements such as no spelling mistakes, no serious grammatical errors, proper citations throughout, etc. Because the expectations were clear and drafts were integrated into the class, I also warned my students that if I ran into a spelling mistake or grammatical error I would stop reading. This encouraged students to find a source to help them proofread their work. As all experienced writers know, but a mighty few first-year students know, other eyes have to view our writing in order to catch our mistakes. By being crystal clear about expectations, and “nit picky” about the spelling and the grammar, I also found papers took less time to evaluate.

Thirdly, I allowed rewrites, required of some and optional for others. These rewrites need a clear and firm deadline to avoid the

scenario of having to read about Colonial American when the course and your energies have marched onward toward the Civil War.

I also learned some lessons concerning the number of assignments to require. I planned the course originally to include three essays and a final exam that would also have a writing component. When numbers of students in introductory courses exceed thirty students, this quantity of assignments becomes unrealistic. I have trimmed the assignments to include two essays over the course of the semester. This may sound like the shell of a “writing component,” but I have found that by requiring drafts and allowing for rewrites two assignments can give students needed feedback and the opportunity of a real “writing course” within a course.

On a final note, I marched my classes to the writing center at the beginning of the semester so that all knew where it was and how it could support their writing. Many of the students embraced the writing center and in so doing provided themselves with a resource that could support them throughout their college career.

Conclusion

Teaching writing in entry level classes can facilitate the college-wide goal of improving retention of first-year students by fostering a sense of belonging to the college community. By requiring writing in entry level courses and encouraging collaboration either with peers, professors and/or the writing center, we are connecting first-year students to the academic community. Writing produces an exchange between student and teacher at a level that test taking does not require. If you can walk into the bagel shop downtown and know a student's name having gotten to know them through writing, that student is one step closer to knowing the gum blobs on the sidewalk. Connections between people is really what those gum blobs are all about anyway! Writing connects people to one another, and connections are what belonging is all about.