

How Do HPER Majors Learn to Write?

Linda Levy

Within the Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, writing becomes the tool that is used to learn about writing. Learning to write and learning to write in a particular discipline are both easy and hard to separate. At times, faculty members choose to teach their students how to write. More often, however, I find our faculty use various methods of writing to encourage the students to learn about writing while they learn about the discipline.

As I examine the choices my colleagues make in their writing assignments, patterns develop. I find that no matter which type of writing the faculty assigns, free writes, peer edits, journals, article critiques, or research projects, the outcome for each student is the same. The goal is to encourage each student's writing potential to grow by practicing writing.

One of the ways we assist our students to become better writers is by the use of portfolios. Our physical education faculty have joined together to utilize class assignments as a means for students to gather data in a more meaningful way. Each assignment that the students are given as they proceed through their core requirements, has a purpose. The courses students take during their first two years have assignments emphasizing the physically educated person. During the last two years, the assignments are geared toward preparing the students to become professional

physical educators. Each writing assignment is therefore to be included in the student's portfolio. As the portfolio takes shape, the students have a collection of their work that represents what they have learned and what they can do. The portfolio is said to be complete when the student writes "explanarians" that precedes each portfolio entry. These explanarians provide details as to why the particular entry was included in the portfolio. This is the final step connecting the learning process with the content, and with the other subjects in the HPER discipline.

To best describe how we teach writing or how writing is used to teach how to write, I will provide some examples of writing assignments from some of our HPER faculty. Each example includes either the discipline or the class from which the assignment comes.

In Physical Education pedagogy, for example, a variety of writing styles are employed. Free writes, peer edits, and double entry "journaling" are used to teach writing by encouraging the expression of ideas.

As the student is asked to do a free write, the emphasis is to reflect on the topic of the day. The writing is collected, the instructor comments on the content, then returns the free write to the student. The student is then instructed to use the free write as if it were the first draft of a paper that will be collected again. By having the opportunity to simply write, the student can generate ideas related to pedagogy. They do not have to worry about being graded. The pressure is off. The idea of using the language becomes the focus of the exercise. Their anxiety of what to write is diminished. Later, the student uses the information in subsequent drafts to polish his or her work, to fix the grammar and sentence construction.

Peer edits are used in almost the opposite way. The student writes a paper trying to include all necessary content. A peer edit system is employed to try to find errors related to sentence flow, sentence construction, spelling, and grammar. In this case the student editors are also graded on their ability to review their

peer's work. The instructor collects another draft, looking for content. Finally, the student is given the opportunity to review all edits, incorporating all suggestions into the final format.

Double entry journaling is another way to encourage the expression of ideas by first requiring a factual, logical explanation of some topic related to the content. The student is instructed to not look at that assignment again for two (2) days. When the student is allowed to return to the original work, he or she rereads what was written, and then thinks, analyzes, make judgments, and finds a point of view about what was written. The goal now is to react to the original writing. This assignment focuses more on writing about how the idea is expressed or, as the instructor puts it, "the emotion of writing."

Another content based class takes journal writing in a different direction. This assignment comes from an Applied Nutrition course. For this assignment, the students keep a nutrition and activity log. They record everything they eat and everything they do. Using computer software, they calculate the nutritional content of the foods they eat as well as their caloric expenditure from their activities. For each entry, they write about their feelings and attitudes about their intake versus output, including any stressors that they may have had during their mini-study. When their log is complete, the journal writing becomes essay writing. The students are asked to discuss their overall nutritional condition in a more formal structure. They need to include an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

Following this assignment the instructor requires a Personal Program Plan. The student takes the data gathered from the nutrition and activity log, analyzes the information, and writes a plan of action for him or herself. This assignment includes goal writing as well as assessment procedures. The emphasis now is on writing mechanics. The purpose of this assignment is to prepare students to apply nutritional information in a workplace that may include students, adults and seniors.

One of the core requirements in Physical Education is a "Q"

course, Evaluation of Physical Education. In this course the student collects data related to performance or health and fitness. After learning how to statistically analyze the data which they have collected, they are required to explain and interpret their results in writing. The paper requires an Introduction, and Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections. This is where the student's understanding of data analysis becomes evident. They are able to prove comprehension through writing.

The "W" course our Physical Education majors take is called Motor Development. One of the assignments for this class is a 15 minute, in-class, writing piece that encourages the student to write under pressure. The student has to write a synopsis of a chapter from the text which must begin with a strong introductory sentence and contain a conclusion. While the student knows the assignment and can, therefore, prepare ahead of time, no outlines are permitted in class. The goal is to be able to write informatively, and with good grammar and sentence construction within a time limit. The instructor meets two (2) goals along the way: the students are prepared for class, and they learn to write.

Our Health Education majors are given a number of different types of writing assignments in their classes. Journaling is often used to practice writing. Again, the thought here is that as the student writes, he or she becomes a better writer.

Unlike some faculty members however, one of our Health Educators does not collect these journal writings. Stress Management is the "W" course for our Health Education Majors. While journal writing for this class is used to assess attendance, the main purpose of these assignments is for the student to reflect on their own stressors. The student is asked to utilize the lesson of that particular class to identify their stressors, to analyze some stress management technique, or to ponder the theoretical basis of stress. Journal entries are then written to encourage the student to react to these lessons. The writing portion of the journal is not only therapeutic but also educational. The students learn to write by writing.

For other assignments, this particular faculty member requires her students to be more specific as they complete their assignments. She teaches her students to write objectives and lesson plans. These tasks are included in projects that students complete for the class, and can also be used once the students begin to work in their fields. The focus of this program planning assignment is to give the student the chance to make logical connections between the content and its application. They choose or are assigned a topic, gather data, and plan how the information could be presented to a group of people. The students then present their lessons. Following each of these types of assignments, the student is asked to write a critique. This reevaluation process allows reflection, analysis and reaction. This writing teaches students how their focused use of language can be helpful in exploring their discipline.

Another member of our Health Education faculty uses prose writing to teach students to write. In their Mental Health Issues class, the students learn about particular topics through class lectures and by critiquing articles and reviewing literature. Students gather information and write by story telling. They put their thoughts on paper as if the information were to be included in a story book. They not only are able to synthesize information, but they become adept at relaying that information in an understandable and professional manner.

The Health Education majors in the Wellness Management option learn business writing. Their option prepares them to work as health care administrators, managers, or perhaps, wellness instructors. They are asked to organize, produce, and present to the class proposals, grants, pamphlets, and newsletters related to various health issues that will professionally prepare them for these potential careers.

Our athletic training faculty often assign writing that combines information learned in the many classes specific to that discipline. One example is the rehabilitation project, taken from a junior level Rehabilitation of Athletic Injuries course. This semester-

long, work-in-progress uses material students learn in classes during their freshman and sophomore years, and combines it with new information learned throughout this course. The assignment is to write about a particular injury from the time it happens through the rehabilitation process. While the student is required to review former texts in addition to current pieces of literature, the emphasis is on writing in more simplistic terms. This time, the students are asked to write using language that they themselves can understand, minimizing the more formal writing that usually is the result of research. As each portion of the project is written, it is collected and commented on for content. The student rewrites and resubmits the project three (3) times during the process. Finally, the student presents the work to the rest of the class who offer comments of their own that often help the writer understand areas of weakness. The final product is often a piece of work that students can use as they become professionals in the rehabilitation field. The goal in this type of assignment is to provide a means for the student to become comfortable with, and therefore use, the language of that particular discipline.

Another type of writing that our students learn is scientific writing. These assignments are used throughout the curriculum in classes where more research-based topics are studied. The examples of assignments that follow help to enhance the students understanding of the science behind our discipline.

In one particular health class, the student is given a model of a professionally written article from a health journal. The students in the class are taught how to write as if they are going to be published. They learn what each part of the article includes and why the language is used the way it is used. Their assignment is to write an article similar to the model. They are given rules to follow and deadlines to meet. They learn to write by following the model. The faculty member who teaches this class is quick to point out that while the student is not required to hand in a draft of what they have written, she willingly accepts first drafts if the student has completed the assignment prior to its due date.

A faculty member who teaches an upper division exercise science class assigns a similar project. The student is asked to gather data and write a technical paper. The student must define all terms, analyze the data, and provide conclusions. A handout is supplied to the student to use as a guideline for this type of writing. Again, the student is encouraged to complete the paper early enough for the instructor to provide feedback in the form of editing. The goal of this assignment is to prepare the student to write work that can be published.

Our athletic training students are also given this opportunity. Very early on in their curriculum, they are taught how to read scientific articles. During their first year, they are asked to write a research paper on ergogenic aids. During their sophomore year, the students are given an assignment to summarize and critique 10-15 original research articles on a topic, that they choose, related to injury assessment. They submit their drafts twice for peer review and twice to the instructor. The goal here is for the student to draw some conclusion based on the literature review. By their junior year, they are asked to interpret data from a research article and present that information to their classmates. In addition, the students prepare an abstract and present it to the class as if it were a "Free Communication" session at a professional conference. Each of these writing assignments is intended to stimulate an interest in scientific writing.

Of the many writing assignments given to our Recreation majors, the one completed by our interns is the most interesting. These students compile a portfolio describing their internship experience. As the instructor says, "they keep a paper trail." Included in the student's portfolio is their vita, all formal letters between them and the agency, a daily log, and a detailed program or some recommendation for improvement that the agency would be able to implement. The students' daily log, however, is what truly connects them to their major. They are given the task of not only writing what they do each day, but also writing about their feelings and emotions surrounding their tasks. This reflection

piece is intended to help students identify their strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and their effect on people and places.

None of these writing assignments actually teach our students to write, yet all of them teach the student something about writing. Writing is encouraged everywhere in our curriculum. Through the process of writing in journals, producing essays or stories, free writing that becomes a first draft, program planning, or writing technically, each of our HPER students learn to express ideas. It is that expression of ideas that allows our students to become more comfortable with writing, which, in turn, encourages them to write.