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University of Denver undergraduate students largely endorse the statement that writing well will be very important in their careers and personal lives. And yet, on any given writing assignment instructors often feel their students are not performing to their potential. I think that, at least for some students, this conundrum results from adaptive, reasonable behavior on their part that can be modified. Students, faced with a range of competing demands on their time, and acknowledging that any single writing assignment is likely to contribute very modestly, if at all, to their overall writing ability, sometimes choose to allocate the minimal resources needed to get a grade acceptable to them. They do this because they view any given writing assignment as useful only to that end, to achieve a grade, and perhaps abstractly to contribute ever so modestly to their general writing skills. And often, they are exactly right. The assignments we design are sometimes purely academic exercises that lack long term, and sometimes even short term, relevance. I think the problem of students devoting less time and attention to our writing assignments than would represent their best work and serve to further growth in their writing and thinking can be addressed. In particular, I think that by transforming our writing assignments from arbitrary to relevant and thereby increasing student's intrinsic motivation we may be able to stimulate better thinking and relatedly higher quality writing. While this may do little for students who perform poorly for other reasons, it should increase effort by those students making the rational, adaptive choice of allocating the minimal resources needed to get the grade they target. Writing that results from increased intrinsic motivation and effort should further their writing both through the act of practicing pushing oneself and because we will then be critiquing writing that is not stunted by limited effort.

Survey data from 766 students enrolled in WRIT 1122/1622 in January 2009 indicated that 33% of students thought writing would be highly important in their career after graduation, and 80% felt it would at least be important. Further, 63% felt writing would be important or highly important in their personal and public life outside of their career. While only 11% of students felt they were strong writers who excel in most writing situations, 51% felt they are proficient in most writing situations and less than 5% endorsed that sometimes or frequently they think or are told their writing is unsatisfactory. Therefore, the first disconnect between faculty and students may be either a) that they feel they are better writers than we do (perhaps reinforced by grade inflation), or b) they are able to write better than they do in our courses.

As I reflect on my own students, I realize that in many cases I am not sure whether their or my assessment of their writing ability is the more accurate for at least two reasons. First, I'm not sure I have good data on their actual writing ability as I think they often don't submit their best work as assignments in my classes. Second, in order to reconcile this difference of opinion, I may need to compare their writing to some more widely agreed upon criteria. Certainly there are criteria within my discipline, and in my professional life I regularly evaluate the thinking and writing of my colleagues for publication using these professional disciplinary criteria. I think I could make reasonable adjustments to these criteria for the fact that undergraduates are novice professional writers, if I had given them an assignment that in some way maps on to the kinds of writing I evaluate as a professional.

However, I typically have not structured my assignments with an eye toward a professional outlet. When I sit down to read student papers I am not expecting or evaluating them for their potential contribution to the field or as dissemination from the field to lay audiences. Instead I am often simply evaluated whether they have adequately done what I asked them to do in the assignment. Rather than be surprised or frustrated about the lack of creativity and insight in a stack of student papers I should be amazed

that in every stack someone manages to demonstrate creativity and insight with such an arbitrary and uninspiring task.

What makes an assignment arbitrary?

Many of us assign final "term" papers out of habit or obligation. We use a general final paper structure that asks students to choose a topic from the course and write a paper about it using the style and approach common to our discipline. However by 'common to our discipline' we typically mean the arbitrary student assignments common to our discipline that primarily share citation style with our professional work and are otherwise more similar to student papers across disciplines than to anything we would actually read or write as professionals. As faculty we likely excelled at writing term papers in our major, although with reflection we might agree that we also often did not exhibit our best writing and thinking in term papers. As compared to writing I do as a professional, for example, my student work was often completed less planfully, with less time, with no or fewer revisions, and without outside commentary. As a professional I devote considerable attention and energy to the way I present my ideas, I try out multiple options, I discuss these options with my students and colleagues, and I have formal feedback from other professionals on the written product. I would be irresponsible to do less.

Furthermore, the assumed audience of my student paper, if not specified by the assignment, was the instructor or grader, who was likely to be more knowledgeable about the topic than I, the writer, was. As a professional I assume my audience is made up of my peers, and also some students and other readers who are less knowledgeable than I am about the topic. As noted in Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professors' Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, writing for a more knowledgeable reader than oneself is a difficult and inauthentic task. Some common student mistakes may result directly from this practice, for example failing to walk through the steps of an argument in sufficient detail, leaving out appropriate background information, or using an inappropriate (either too colloquial or too arcane) voice. When the reader communicates to an authentic audience an inherent part of the task is targeting the information provided to the knowledge base of the audience. In fact, as professionals we frequently write to provide information at different levels of complexity to different audiences, and we work at this task explicitly (if not always successfully).

The lack of immediacy and relevance we and students feel about the classic term paper can be easily seen in the fact that we usually devote little class time to discussing the assignment, we are generally not looking forward to reading the products, and while we may offer students the opportunity to turn in a draft ahead of time, very few students actually do so. Not only do they not turn in drafts to us, we actively discourage students from seeking help from anyone other than us, although this would almost never be the case in professional writing. Neither we nor they perceive the assignment as anything more than an individual thought piece. Certainly a term paper used by a prepared, organized, motivated student as a thought piece is a pleasure to read and does advance their own learning and reasoning. And of course I think there is value in a though piece when it is truly used as such. However, this potential may be infrequently explored by students, not because they are lazy or unwise, but because they are making a rationale cost-benefit analysis.

We may be able to better stimulate learning and reasoning by designing assignments with increased relevance to students and by encouraging professional writing habits such as revision based in part on reader commentary. To the extent that we do this within our disciplines we may also be able to bring our professional evaluation skills to bear by starting students down the path of writing assignments that are like what they would write as a professional in the field. In that process we can teach them not only about writing but also about reading and critiquing professional writing in their discipline. Further, in my own work I find the reflection and rewriting that comes from thoughtful peer critique is sometimes the most effective way to change and expand my critical thinking. I think that many instructors appreciate the links between advancing critical thinking and good writing and may find benefits from students' participation in this iterative process that is so common in our

professional work. While I have myself and have talked with other colleagues who have sometimes found the peer critique process unsatisfying in classes, I think this process itself may benefit from increased authenticity. Instructors incorporate this technique because we want to improve writing, revision, and discourse, however students may view it as simply another hurdle. If we are able to engage students in an authentic writing project that naturally includes peer critique they may better appreciate this critical part of the writing (and thinking) process.

What might make an assignment relevant?

This idea of differential writing skill being exhibited by the same student in an arbitrary versus a relevant circumstance came from Doug Hesse's example of a student essay for a class as compared to a letter they had written to apply for an internship. In this case it is clear that the letter has obvious immediate practical importance to the writer. There may be circumstances or courses where something as relevant as an application is appropriate, however I imagine this case is rare. Nevertheless, there are types of professional writing that may be more accessible to novice professional writers and which therefore might be real (or convincing hypothetical) options for students. Part of the challenge then is not only creating assignments with potential relevance, but conveying this relevance clearly to students in order to engage their best effort.

Obstacles to creating relevant assignments

The first obstacle that comes to my mind is the fact that students are simply not prepared and do not have the time in a quarter to write something in the form of much of our finished professional work. The second is that we may not as individuals have experience with the types of professional writing in our disciplines that might be most appropriate for students to attempt and therefore we might not be prepared to help students see the process through should they be interested in doing that. A third is that many of our majors do not intend to pursue academic or professional careers directly in their major and therefore might not find disciplinary writing that much more relevant than the classic term paper.

Tackling obstacles

To tackle the obstacle of time, we might consider having students work toward a single finished final product beginning early in the quarter. The usual smattering of smaller assignments, rather than being independent of the final paper, could be essential to the final product. This would not necessarily include only drafts of all or part of the final product. They could include explorations of several potential final product ideas, they could be reactions to products that are similar to what we hope they will produce, and they could include real peer reviews of the work of other students in the course. Some of this effort could occur in small groups set up like workshops to reduce some of the homework burden (and free it for other types of work) and also to reduce the grading burden.

The obstacle of potential outlets may vary considerably by field. A quick survey of social science professional societies reveals that many have publications that aim to provide lay summaries of current research or theoretical debates, or that address policy-relevant questions. Students may actually be ideal candidates to attempt such a task as the divide between professional and lay thinking in their chosen discipline is still very salient to them. Taking students through the process of identifying a question or topic, identifying an outlet (among a restricted set we offer), and working through to actual submission may be particularly rewarding. Another possibility is to partner with students in writing projects that we might ourselves consider; perhaps having them focus on writing what will be a subsection of a larger document, or working as a class to complete one submission.

To tackle the issue of relevance for students not planning to pursue graduate or academic work in their major, students themselves might identify a publication forum appropriate for their intended career. This assignment could occur very early in the quarter and might have the further benefit of helping students explore potential career options more concretely. For example, a number of psychology majors go on to careers in education, human resources, or medicine. There are a number of publications that aim to bridge the gap between psychology research or theory and these applied fields which might be

appropriate targets for student writing. Over time, we might also develop a repertoire of potential publication outlets. Students might then narrow in on a publication and using the author guideline information summarize what the publication is looking for, who the readership is, and what types of topics are common and appropriate. Short in-class brainstorming writing could be used to generate topic ideas and students could organize themselves around these topics early in the quarter to work on shared research and peer critique.

Conclusions

While this essay in some sense set up a straw man argument by beginning with the assumption that most instructors are using a classic term paper format, I hope it served to highlight some possible advantages of framing assignments in terms of their relevance to the field. I know a number of DU professors who have very creative writing and other final project assignments, and I certainly don't mean to suggest that assignments that are working well at activating students' intrinsic motivation and stimulating their best thinking and writing should be replaced by assignments geared toward professional outlets. However, in the case where the goal of an assignment is extensive, targeted research into a topic and articulation of a position or argument related to that research, increasing the relevance of the outlet may help motivate students' best work.