

Rethinking Feminist Pedagogy and the Question of Audience in ASEMs

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Over my past two years at DU, I have taught my ASEM, "Sex and Globalization" three times. Despite its racy title, the course is not really about sex. My primary objective is to teach students about the gendered (and sexed and raced) dimensions of globalization while also helping them refine their writing skills. To help with this first objective, we spend a large amount of time reading about structures of inequality that shape global processes. Teaching students to analyze the gendered dimensions of problems like sweatshop labor, migration, and the sexualized nature of war means helping them adopt (and convincing them of the worthiness of) a critical feminist lens as a valid academic framework. Along the way, I hope these lessons about inequality help students make sense of the world that awaits them beyond the college classroom. In my mind, this is an essential part of feminist pedagogy that one should expect (and maybe even require?) from a course offered by a Gender and Women's Studies program.

However, I have always struggled with the degree that my writing assignments, especially in ASEM, provide students formal instruction on scholarly writing "versus" giving them opportunity to write for audiences that fall outside the traditional "professor as audience"

formula. As a feminist scholar and teacher, translating classroom learning (and writing) into vessels for broader social change is a central to my pedagogy. And yet, I find myself trapped (or succumbing?) to the pressure of assigning and teaching writing for more traditional scholarly audiences. Thus, for this short piece, I would like to think more about this conundrum by asking what kinds of writing should we assign in our ASEMs. And for the purposes of my class, how can these assignments work within a feminist-centered pedagogy that teaches students to embrace (and use) writing as a generator of social change?

The Audience of FSEM Writing?

To answer these questions, it seems important to briefly discuss the question of audience. Who should students be writing for in ASEM as opposed to who they might (or will be?) writing for once they leave the hallowed halls of academia? Most of us know that our students live and write in a world that looks radically different from the one we knew (and wrote in) as college students. According to a recent survey of DU student writing, our students spend significantly more time reading and writing in genres of social media as opposed to the traditional print-based mediums that dominated classroom

teaching twenty years ago. Ironically, however, students seem to recognize that writing itself (as a skill, requirement, and/or activity) will be important in their lives following college². And, despite the general grumblings of my ASEM students, I honestly believe most of them want to improve their writing, if only because of its “real world” applications. The stakes are, for those who possess a “job-driven” mentality to higher education, often much higher than simply earning an A in a college writing course.

To deny these realities seems to be denying the world in which our students live and exist. As much as I would like to think that the next big “feminist” scholar of globalization will pass through my ASEM, I realize that the academic writing I am assigning in my classes has very little to do with the actual writing most of them will produce after leaving DU. And, if I *really* want to be honest with myself, writing that inspires awareness and change is more than likely to be found in a blog, op-ed, or popular press book as opposed to an academic journal.

On the other hand, I believe that most of us teaching ASEM (myself included) have an allegiance and responsibility to teach the content and skills that are our professional specialties. I am not interested in training students how to write “business” speak or post-college shorthand. This is not why I became a professor, and quite frankly, I don’t see this as my job. I do not think the needs of the business community should dictate writing pedagogy in university classes, especially in the liberal arts, the intellectual tradition from which I hail. My responsibility, first and foremost in ASEM, is to teach students what feminist critiques of globalization look like and help them produce (i.e., write, think, envision) their own. In the process, I

secretly hope they might be inspired to embrace writing as a tool for social change in their civic, professional, and personal lives, but I am not holding my breath.

Thus, we arrive at an interesting paradox that university writing programs and instructors have long been busy researching and debating. This debate also plagues those of us who teach writing in classes like ASEM. Who should we teach our students to write for? An audience of scholarly peers or an interested group of concern citizens that they can help educate? At the risk of sounding naïve or reductionist in my thinking, I think the solution is relatively simple: I don’t see these approaches as mutually exclusive or as rigid binaries. I think we can do both with our writing instruction and more importantly, I think an ASEM provides an ideal setting to do so.

What I’m Doing: A Critical Reflection

This grand proclamation thus necessitates some self-reflection about my own pedagogical choices when it comes to the types of writing I assign in my ASEM. Ironically before beginning the institute, I naively thought my writing assignments achieved both of these goals. I structure, my ASEM around four formal writing assignments: (e.g., a reader’s response journal, a large research paper, and two short papers). The rationale for the reader’s response journal is to give students an opportunity to informally reflect on what we read and connect it to their lived experience. My goal is to help validate and engage their opinions and more importantly, situate the material we read in relation to their own lives. This is easier said than done on most days, but unfortunately, it is the only assignment that actually asks students to write for themselves rather than for me.

² Get writing survey from Doug

When I look at the rationale and design of the other three writing assignments (e.g., the research paper and two shorter papers), I realize that I have more or less re-inscribed the same tried and true “traditional” approaches to undergraduate student writing that David Bartholomae describes. By and large, I have asked my students to demonstrate their knowledge by writing papers for scholarly audience in a format (and with a purpose) that shows that they have mastered the content and discourse of undergraduate scholarly writing. Is this bad writing pedagogy? Maybe not. But, if I am trying to give students the opportunity to write thoughtful feminist critiques that the rest of the world might find useful, I need to rethink my goals and rationales for these assignments.

Before heading down the wormhole of self-doubt and writing-instructor despair, I would like to discuss the first of these formal writing assignments, the research paper. As a supporter of the “write to learn” model, I believe writing assignments should help students meet concrete, content-driven objectives. In my class, this means assigning writing that helps students understand what a feminist analysis of globalization looks like. Like most professors, I have enlisted the aid of a more –or less traditional research paper. I ask students to develop a research question. Then they have to locate and read scholarly articles. For some, this might even require a trip to the library. Along the way, we spend a significant amount of time working on project proposals, researching peer reviewed sources, drafting, revising, talking, editing, and “working” out what it means to “do” a scholarly, feminist analysis. We have also thoughtful discussions about what it means to write for an audience of scary feminists, and perhaps more importantly, what it means to write for audiences who might be skeptical of using the categories

of gender, sexuality, and race as lens to study global phenomena.

I feel like these are worthy intellectual exercises that hopefully help students’ writing evolve and improve over the duration of the course. And, by and large, they research and write papers on topics that would have never have occurred to me, often to such an extent that I actually think some of them “get” what it means to study globalization from a feminist perspective. I see victory in their papers, and for this reason, sometimes I think I have the right to celebrate myself as both a successful writing instructor and feminist scholar. Not suprisingly, I am comfortable keeping the research paper as the “largest” writing assignment in my ASEM. It constitutes approximately half of the pages of their assigned writing during the quarter (i.e., approximately 10-15) and it seems to be working.

Beyond the Academy

At the same time, I realize this assignment does not teach students to write in the world that awaits them outside the college classroom, nor does provide the opportunity engage wider audiences that a feminist-centered writing class should. This is where I think the other two writing assignments in my ASEM (currently five pages each) might be put to better use. As it stands, one of them asks students to the degree that “love” should be used as a factor in analyzing the ‘winners’ and “losers” of globalization. To be honest, the assignment itself is a bit heartbreaking because it requires students to rethink the circumstances that inspire (or necessitate) women from the Global South to leave their own children and care for, love, and clean up after those residing in the Global North. The other five page paper asks students to analyze U.S. immigration policies by using sexuality as a category of

analysis. (e.g., what happens when we think about the persecution of gays and lesbians who seek asylum or refugee status in the USA? What happens when we think about human sexuality as a factor that facilitates or impedes the movement of people around the world?).

These are tough issues that require a significant amount of time for most students to grasp, let alone “enjoy.” But, I also realize that there’s a wealth of different ways I could ask students to engage these ideas outside a scholar-as audience paper. They should be writing letters to human rights organizations or employers or their peers. They could post to a feminist blog. They could petition the U.N. or the Secretary of Defense. Heck, they could even write a feminist blog (an assignment I actually require in another GWST class). I could - and should - be helping them refine their writing by providing assignments that engage with genres other socially-conscious, intellectually-curious people read.

If one of my objectives is to help students engage in writing that generates awareness (and maybe even social change?), then clearly at some point, I’m going to have to let go of the notion that the only way to teach college writing is to assign traditional academic papers. After all, they already have a ten page, original research paper to research and write. At the very least, I should be making space for other types of writing in my ASEM. Working within the quarter system and a ten-week time frame makes this challenging. It also means that I have to take the time to go back and revise writing assignments that I have already spent a significant amount of time planning. As stated earlier, I don’t think the objectives of my ASEM necessitate that scholarly, academic writing is the only way to teach students writing. I simply have to take the time to “do” what I ask of my students: to create writing assignments that pays credence to (and teaches) the transformative possibilities of writing both in - and outside- the college classroom.

