Structuring Objectives in ASEM

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In my ASEM, titled "Emotions in Theatre and the Brain," the course content is built around two lines of inquiry into the nature of human emotion. Students learn that emotions can be studied objectively by manipulating variables in psychological experiments and measuring one or more aspects of the emotional response. Students are also exposed to the idea that emotions are also inherently subjective phenomena, so their personal experiences and insights are also valuable. These two methods of learning about emotions, objective and subjective, are paralleled with instruction in two types of writing. Students learn to write objectively, in the third person, reporting on facts, following the logic of the scientific process, using evidence from previous empirical studies, complete with citations in APA style. In parallel, they are encouraged to write subjectively, weaving a compelling story about emotions from their personal history, using the first person, reporting on emotions and memories, following the chronology of their insight unfolding over time, and using evidence from their own experience, no citations needed.

There are several goals of my ASEM. They can be most easily divided into objectives surrounding the course content and objectives aimed at building specific skills. Below, I refer to the objectives regarding course content as "Writing to Learn" objectives, and objectives regarding writing skills as "Learning to Write" objectives. I will outline the nature of these objectives briefly, and then move on to a section about the various ways that I try to motivate the students to achieve both of these objectives.

Writing to Learn

There are two major objectives in my ASEM that could be characterized as broader generalizable skills that students must master while writing in the course. The first involves clearly structuring knowledge, and the second involves drawing parallels between scientific reports of experimental findings and their personal experiences. The first goal is primary in that in order to draw the correct parallels, the knowledge must be structured correctly.

The first goal, structuring knowledge, also reflects the clarity with which the students understand the course content. All students in the course write about a "truth' of human emotion. Many students choose to compare and contrast prominent theories about emotion, or to report the results of a particular experiment. In all of these cases, students are encouraged, as William James would say, to "carve nature at its joints." By this, I mean that the students are encouraged to zoom in on a single distinction that is especially crucial in the topic they're discussing. An example from the present paper would be the distinction between

objective and subjective ways of learning about emotions. I encourage students to make the precise qualities that distinguish these from one another the crux of their research paper and to summarize in a single sentence the most important distinguishing quality. For example, I might summarize by saying, "The main distinction between objective and subjective methods of learning about emotion is that objective methods involve measuring emotion using empirically validated, replicable means and subjective methods involve personal experience and insight." To emphasize that this is a structural goal, I often have students represent this distinction visually, using a two- or three-column chart, for example.

Figure 1 displays an example of a two-column chart, depicting the distinction. between understanding objective and subjective methods of inquiry about human emotion.

The second goal, drawing parallels between empirical studies and the students' personal lives, is both exciting and tricky. Most students in this course enjoy writing about their personal experiences. However, it can be difficult for them to use these personal examples as precise parallels to the scientific concepts, theories or findings that they are writing about. The inability to draw this parallel in a tight fashion is in some sense helpful and diagnostic. Often, students who struggle with the person parallel lack complete understanding of the underlying distinction I have asked them to make. Often, to help with this parallel, I encourage students to make a second row in their three-column chart (or other visual tool). Then I ask them to make sure that their personal examples align well with the examples on the chart. Most often, the student can then see when the distinction that has been made in the first row of the chart does not serve the examples second row equally well. This lack of deep parallelism can be more easily hidden in a lengthy piece of writing than in a bare visual representation, such as the chart. Having students contain their thoughts in the chart forces them to be specific, clear, and decisive about the structure of their topic. To me, the chart assists in the construction of an apt analogy, and can lead to one of the deepest forms of understanding.

In Figure 2, I've added another row to my previous chart. This second row adds writing skills as a second goal in my class. The existing columns inform the distinction between the two types of writing I would like to teach, and with this structure, the hope is that the analogy is informative.

		Perspective	
		Objective	Subjective
Goal	Content	Empirical measures	Personal Insight

Figure 1. Contrasting goals of objective and subjective methods of inquiry about human emotion.

		Perspective	
		Objective	Subjective
Goal	Content	Empirical measures	Personal Insight
	Writing Skills	Third person, technical	First person, narrative

Figure 2. Writing skills added to goals of objective and subjective methods of inquiry about human emotion.

These full charts also represent an important way of thinking within experimental psychology – a factorial design. In a factorial design, two types of manipulations of an experimental setting or procedure are 'crossed' with one another. When understanding the results of these experiments, it is an important skill to deconstruct the factorial into its component parts. hile all four conditions are informative, it is also useful to think separately about each factor, or main effect, separately, and then how they relate to one another, or interact. In this way, structuring knowledge and drawing parallels prepares the students in my class to think more like a professional research psychologist.

Learning to Write

In addition to representing psychological concepts clearly, another major goal of the course is writing proficiency. I try to convey two main messages about writing. The first is that writing is a communicative act. The second is that different writing styles are important for different contexts.

There are several qualities of my course that serve as evidence of my conceptualization that writing is communicative, most of them are the writing strategies I offer my students. I ask them to try to imagine their audience as their roommate, or a student in a different class. Ultimately, I would like them to convey their ideas to a reader who is educated and bright but lacks the specialized knowledge taught in the class. I often ask them to explain the idea for their paper to their roommate before writing, to solidify the logical structure and to keep audience in mind. Another artifact of my communicative view of writing is that I have them work with several different peers in the class to review drafts of the paper. I try to make the case that once someone reads your paper more than once or twice, they are not an objective judge of whether you're transmitting ideas clearly or not. Finally, I encourage students to leave drafts of their paper alone for a while between revisions.

In this way, they are re-visiting their own arguments with somewhat fresh eyes.

The second writing goal, for students to understand that there are different writing styles for different contexts, is strongly emphasized by the writing assignments. Students are asked first to draft two separate papers, one written objectively, in the third person, reporting on empirical findings from the course readings, and the other written subjectively, in the first person, reporting on an emotional experience. The final paper asks students to weave these two styles of writing together into a seamless argument for or against a particular "truth" about human emotion. I have found that it is imperative that students write their drafts separately, to try on the very different styles and voices, and only then are students successful in combining them to make a unified argument.

Motivating Course Objectives

Another large part of my class is to motivate the students to write well, and to see the utility of writing well beyond the course context. One philosophy that I employ for this purpose is that of transparency. I walk the students through the logic of the university offering the course, and then of my own grading system for their assignments in the course. In this attempt, my goal is to make the objectives of the course clear, challenging, but ultimately achievable.

In service of this goal of transparency, I introduce the objectives of the course in the context that DU is holding me accountable to make sure that they graduate as a proficient writer. I then have them help me enumerate the reasons that DU would care so much about the skill of writing to warrant a specialized course that is required for graduation. In addition, after students have turned in several drafts of assignments, we reserve

time to have students reveal to one another what their post-graduation plans are. I have the students brainstorm about how they might use writing in these various jobs or hobbies. In addition, reinforce the second message about writing in the course by asking students to classify these writings as subjective or objective. This helps reinforce my second "Learning to Write" goal in a more relevant, real-world context.

To achieve transparency in how students will be evaluated, I give students as much information about assignments and grading as early as possible. On the first day of class, I give them a sample final paper, written to the exact prompt that their final paper will have. I also give them the rubric that I use to grade the papers. I first thought to do this in response to comments on student evaluations that indicated that the students didn't know what the final paper should look like, even as they were completing exercises and drafts of it throughout the quarter. This grading preview also had the unexpected benefit of an opportunity to make my grading system transparent. After seeing what I expect the final product of the course to be, and the rubric with which it will be graded, I ask for the students' input on the deadlines that outlines, drafts and final papers will be due. I have found that the students are more willing to stick to the deadlines that are set when they have had a voice in setting them.

Concluding Comment

Many faculty members struggle with the balance between content and writing instruction in an ASEM course. I think that the 10-week course is indeed too short for students to digest a quarter's worth of content while completing related writing assignments. What has allowed me to feel as though there is enough space is

when the understanding of the content informs the writing, and the writing process underscores the content. By collapsing content-driven and writing- driven goals into a single underlying structure, students can both write to learn and learn to write.