

Writing to Learn versus Learning to Write: The Impact of Informal and Formal Writing Assignments in ASEM

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At a first glance, and for faculty who did not participate in the curricular discussions that led to the creation of the common curriculum ASEM requirement, the ASEM seems to have been instituted to promote three things: critical thinking, interdisciplinary examination, and (of prime importance) better writing among our students who are preparing to leave the university as their undergraduate odyssey comes to an end. It is also the bookend to the FSEM: a small, intimate fifteen person seminar. For the professor, the course offers the promise of an experience that is interdisciplinary, quirky, centered on the instructor's passion and full of wild promise: an opportunity to stray from one's disciplinary boundaries to teach and engage in deep investigation of a complex issue that might already pervade one's professional work and general consciousness.

There is also the potential that a room full of students will pick *your* course out of the vast array of courses they could choose- your course, whose subject material *could* be as fascinating to them as it is to you. There is also the promise that this won't be the summer camp experience that is the FSEM. In the ASEM, you have seasoned undergrads who have been through writing courses, who have mastered their departmental curriculums, who are acclimated to college expectations and can more clearly prioritize multiple responsibilities, and

who have presumably become adept at time-management. They are ready to buckle down and devote the next ten weeks to the course you have passionately created, and you can ask a lot of them.

The Course

My ASEM is "Globalization from Above and Below." As a social movements scholar and someone who (at least tries) to write about how neoliberalism impacts the ways in which community movements function, the massive phenomenon of globalization lurks in the background of all of my research questions. I obsessively listen to the news of the European debt crisis, for example, trying to figure out how this catastrophe might clue me into a phenomenon I research in my own city: the crisis of public school failure and the politics of urban school reform. I view the ASEM as my chance to tackle something more vast, contradictory, evolving, and mystifying than I can possibly contain within my more narrow research focus or with any other course. This is my chance to look at this phenomenon through multiple lenses: not just sociology, but also Women's and Gender Studies, economics, political science, cultural studies, and activist writings. And I get the chance to think about this fascinating stuff with fifteen

other brains who want to think and talk about the same thing!

And oh, there is that *writing* component. Hmm... what to make of that? The ASEM is not just an interdisciplinary, engaging capstone to an undergraduate odyssey. It is also intentionally designed to sharpen students' writing skills and to make them *better* writers. Although this has always been somewhat of a goal in my other classes, I have realized that this has been a secondary goal of mine. More important to me has been that the writing students produce stand as evidence to me that students' learned and critically thought about the MOST important thing: the content of the course. So at first, I felt a bit out of my depth. The writing component seemed like an add-on for me. For those of us who remember the CORE, the ASEM is a restructuring of the CORE- with an added (and integral) writing component. As ASEM instructors, we must emphasize and teach writing, as well as teach the substantive material.

Most often, as instructors, we think about teaching as a dual exercise in and of itself already: our responsibility is on the *content* of teaching and the *process* of teaching. We constantly try, and fail, and try again to translate the volumes of disciplinary work we have consumed into an engaging lesson that will capture students' imaginations, bring out their best selves, and maybe even change the way they view and impact the world. We think about content and about process, about what kinds of material are vital to teach, and how exactly to teach these.

The ASEM adds a third dimension to this; forcing us to think about not just *pedagogy* as process, but also about *writing* as process. So the usual dual goal of teaching has now become triple with the ASEM. We are to communicate important information, teaching

effectively, and produce better writers. For me, someone who usually thinks about writing as a vehicle for digesting content, but not really as a goal in and of itself, there was the temptation to think of the writing component as a simple overlay or add-on. I'd figure I'd build in a few writing workshops here and there, have students revise a draft, include an array of informal and formal writing pieces, and voila! I've done it.

Beyond the Overlay

This is how I approached the writing process in my ASEM at first: as an overlay. A well-intentioned, thorough, and thoughtful overlay, but an overlay nevertheless. I strategically built writing into my syllabus so that it was unmistakable, but I was still not clear on why it was there beyond fulfilling ASEM requirements. What I found, however, is that I enjoyed a cascade of benefits simply by thinking more carefully about instituting this intentional writing process within my course, and found that the writing-intensive requirement gave me more license to demand more productive writing and critical-thinking from the entire class. I have realized that getting students to engage in various and consistent writing exercises forced them to read the material more deeply and critically in order to write. And when they read the material more deeply and critically, they were ready to engage more readily in class discussion.

I instituted a number of writing assignments in this course, mostly to prepare students for class discussion. On the one hand, I felt comfortable instituting a tried and true writing assignment that I use in nearly all my classes: periodic short response papers throughout the quarter. In most of my classes, I ask my students to write a series of two-page response papers, each

covering all of the readings for a given day. In two pages (three at most), students must demonstrate to me that they grasped the main concepts, respond to these concepts with their own reactions and/or critiques, and offer a discussion question. A tall order for a two page paper! Since the ASEM is a writing-intensive seminar, however, I felt license to expand this response paper to four pages, which produced much more careful and in-depth writing from students. Students were to write four of these throughout the quarter. On the days these were due, students came to class having hashed out their reiteration, analysis, and critique of what we had all read. Our class sessions were spent putting all of these analyses into conversation with each other, and playing with student discussion questions. As a result, I had to spend much less time outlining the reading for the class, and spent more time in dynamic and productive discussion that went beyond the readings. To my surprise, these four page papers were even more productive for class discussion than are my usual two page papers—as the two page papers still allow students to skim the material, and perhaps not read it as closely as they must in a writing-intensive seminar.

Because I felt I couldn't ask students to write a four page paper for each class, and because I certainly couldn't grade all of this work, I made it clear at the outset that even on the days that students didn't turn in formal writing, I would assess their preparation for class and their understanding of course readings through various informal, in-class writing assignments (it is, after all, a writing-intensive course!). In my other courses, I don't require writing from students for every class period. But for the ASEM, I felt I had license to ask students to do this. I also made it clear at the outset of the course that I would use these informal

writing assignments in class to assess their preparation for class. Usually, the in-class writing would be prompted by a single, focused question. I would have students do this writing at the beginning of class, or sometimes in the middle. Often, I would have students read each other's writing and start discussion from there. Making their writing "public," even just to each other, produced an accountability to student writing and made the stakes somewhat higher in terms of what students produced.

Writing and the Quality of Class Time

As I began teaching the ASEM, I realized that there was an important and extraordinarily valuable relationship between students' writing and the overall quality of the time we spent together in the classroom. Through crafting writing assignments designed to hold students accountable to the reading (nearly every reading, each class), and by consistently making their work public to each other, I began to see their writing efforts translate into electrified, motivated, and invested discussion that surprisingly held up even when we hit the usual points of collective exhaustion throughout the quarter (I find these are the 4th week and the 7th week walls, where no matter what my lesson plan is, it seems to fall flat at these tough times in the ten week quarter). At the end of the course, one student in the class approached me and said "I don't know what it was about this class, maybe that we met around a table and were facing each other, but I've never had a class where people were so excited to talk *all* the time." I felt this same way. Although the student couldn't quite pinpoint "why" the discussion was consistently so engaging (and maybe it *was* the table that we sat around!), I attribute this to the writing my students were required to produce for the course.

Where I still struggle, however, is around whether or not students actually *became better writers* as a result of my class. I can speak volumes about how constructive and productive short writing assignments like response papers and in-class informal writing assignments were to producing a *quality* of student discussion that I do not experience in my other courses. I have been so moved by this experience that I plan to at least attempt to institute these same consistent writing exercises in my other courses as well. I have now seen the ways in which writing produces a much more enjoyable collective classroom experience, especially in an engaged seminar, and I now realize that student writing powerfully advances my other pedagogical goals. But this is a clear example of “writing-to-learn.” Students really did learn as a result of their writing.

Does Writing Improve?

But did students really “learn-to-write?” That, I cannot confidently answer. Their large writing assignment required them, by week 7, to pick an instance of counter-hegemonic globalization and assess how extensively, and in what ways, it countered hegemonic globalization. Students focused on a wide range of political projects to examine: culture jamming, Venezuela’s 21st century socialism, the fair trade movement, and even localized, conscious hip-hop. These were projects that students picked themselves, and that they were excited about. They read and reviewed each other’s 5-6 page versions of what, by the end of the quarter, was to turn into an 8-10 page polished paper. They were also required to integrate several course readings, as well as outside research (both peer-reviewed and non-peer reviewed sources). I gave them extensive feedback on their midterm papers according to the

detailed rubric I gave them: feedback on everything from grammatical errors and awkward sentences, to how to develop a more convincing argument as to why their chosen topic stands as a clear example of counter-hegemonic globalization. Their final drafts were to reflect this feedback, and most students turned in improved and expanded versions of their earlier papers.

But did they actually become better writers? Or did they simply take my and classmates’ specific feedback to systematically produce a better final version? And what is the difference? This was the most formal piece of writing I had them do (complete with a revision process), and the one piece of writing that was more individualistic. This writing represented an effort to “learn-to-write” as it was much more intentionally designed to hone a broader set of writing skills (including integrating research and making a compelling argument anchored in various scholarship). Yet, besides quickly presenting their final papers in the last week of class for about ten minutes each, this was one piece of writing that wasn’t made public to anyone but myself, and was not for the purposes of enhancing class discussion or our collective understanding. While impressive, these pieces of writing were still not quite as engaging and sharp as the shorter pieces of informal writing.

I now see that many formal writing assignments like this that I assign for my classes are often for an imagined academic audience, and they are important to me—but they don’t necessarily produce a palpable difference in my actual course the way that shorter “write-to-learn” writing exercises might. They require many components and student labor, but it is hard to really assess whether or not the student gained writing skills that they will carry into other writing assignments or tasks ahead of them, academic or

otherwise. While the rest of the student writing for the class magically and magnetically aligned with our collective class interaction, this more formal piece of writing had a mechanistic, abstract, individualistic quality to it that seemed less urgent or applicable. This realization, that my writing assignments produced different kinds of investment in the class and in each other, leaves me wondering how to make more formal, complicated, academic writing assignments take on the same student urgency, passion, excitement, and investment that I saw in the more consistent “write-to-learn” assignments.

