

## Reflections on my use of Writing in ASEM & FSEM Classes

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Writing is a crucial component in my ASEM class of “Politics of Reconciliation” and international-FSEM (iFSEM) class of “Pacific Century – America, China, and Competition for Global Leadership.” In this short piece, I will explain these courses’ empirical themes, the structures of writing assignments, how students have performed with it, and my reflections of students’ learning experiences in these two courses.

Let me begin with my ASEM class of “Politics of Reconciliation.” In this class students examine processes of making and accepting apologies in the political world: domestic and international. Even as individuals, we may find at times that to say “sorry” (or to accept it) is not easy. The task becomes all the more daunting for nation states, for they need to tackle with past wrongs that afflicted many more people and had more dire consequences. By looking at both successful and failed reconciliation projects, students explore the relations between victimizers and victims in varied geographical, historical, ideological, and cultural settings (to be specific – the three cases we examine are: the Rape of Nanking, post-apartheid South Africa, and the federal government’s internment of Japanese Americans during World War II). In

what contexts did these past grievances occur? What were their consequences? To what extent has the painful memory continued to haunt contemporary politics? Why have some political actors apologized while others haven’t? Why are some apologies accepted while others aren’t? What common lessons can we draw from these cases? These are just some of the questions I ask students to explore in this class.

### Three Writing Components

Writing in this class has three components: short memos on readings, movie review, proposal for the final research project, and a ten-page final research paper. For short memos, I offer students a list of questions drawn from the readings and ask them to share their thoughts. Some questions are factual ones to check whether students have done the readings in the first place. Other questions are open-ended ones that require analysis. Students watch the movie *Invictus*, which is about South African reconciliation, and need to produce a movie review of 3-4 pages. For the movie review, I offer students a list of key themes embedded in the movie (leadership, no-loser strategy, political engineering, nationalism, politicizing sports, etc.). Students choose three key words and write their

reviews based on their choices of the key words. Toward the end of the quarter, students will work on their own research topics. To make sure they stay on the right track, I ask students to turn in proposals, in which they need to tell me their topics, the scholarly literature they have located thus far, and raise questions to me so that I can help them more effectively. Finally, students will turn in their final paper by the end of the quarter.

I have taught my ASEM class based on this structure for three years. Students' feedbacks were positive. They felt that all these assignments helped them connect the dots – that is, using various concepts and theories from different disciplines to make sense of real-world cases of reconciliation. They also liked the semi-structured nature of these assignments: students were given guidance on particularly relevant readings and parts of lectures. But they were also given ample autonomy, especially on the last final project, to choose empirical cases that they cared most. The study of reconciliation could be emotionally charged. I always feel rewarded in seeing students using knowledge they learned in class to explore empirical topics they felt passionate about.

### **My iFSEM Course**

My iFSEM class is an experimental one – it is different from mainstream FSEM in that half of the students are domestic, and the other half international. Last year when I taught it the first time, given the topic (Sino-US relations), it was no surprise that all the international students were from China.

To me, a major difference between writing for ASEM and writing for FSEM is that the former is more content-based and substantive, whereas

the latter is more process-based. In other words, for an FSEM class, to train freshmen to become familiar with writing in college is a major purpose. Professors need to teach students to acquire a reasonable level of familiarity with writing at college level and generalizable skills that students can put to use in their forthcoming years at DU. This purpose, however, is and should not be a major factor for ASEM classes. By the time a student takes an ASEM class, she is expected to have acquired such skills and ready to put them in use. Practically, what this means to me is that my iFSEM class emphasizes more about the technical procedures of writing. The fact that half students in my class are international only makes this training/orienting component all the more important.

I designed shorter writing assignments in my iFSEM class. Writing component consists of five short memos on readings and/or latest events in Sino-US relations, debate preparation notes, and a take-home final that test students' ability of using theoretical concepts learnt in class to make sense of real-life phenomena in Sino-US relations.

One key purpose of this class is to train students to consider complex foreign affairs phenomena from alternative perspectives. Hence, I would ask the American students to write and orally defend Chinese government's positions on contentious issues like human rights, Tibet, among others. Meanwhile, I would ask the Chinese students to do the same from the American perspective. Many students liked this arrangement and found it intellectually refreshing.

## Challenges

But let me also address some problems I encountered. Last fall quarter was the first time I offered such an iFSEM. Though already a veteran of the generic version, I found the new, experimental one challenging. To assist the students, the school assigned a senior student to serve as a “writing fellow” in this class. The student fellow was very committed and diligent. She attended all my classes – something that not all freshmen could accomplish. She took careful notes and held both individual appointments and group meetings with students to help them improve their writing. But – somehow I acquired the impression that the particular attention the school invested in this experiment paradoxically overwhelmed the students, especially domestic ones. I had a higher than average percentage of American students complaining that the class was too hard and there was too much writing involved. Some also felt frustrated by the level of English proficiency the Chinese students demonstrated. Since Chinese students constituted half the class, it was no small frustration.

This made me think – writing is an essential part of college learning. But, just like any other academic assignments, it is embedded in culture. As the culture at DU is getting increasingly diverse, are our students prepared to deal with it? Frankly speaking, the root cause of at least a few American students’ complaints was their lack of preparation for this international experience. To be sure, I emailed the American students prior to the start of the fall quarter, alerting them to the truly international (or, more exactly, bilateral) nature of the student body in

this class. Apparently – some were still caught off guard by what they encountered in class. Some students were also confused about what they should or should not expect from the writing fellow.

I will offer iFSEM again this coming fall. I do not expect major changes to the writing assignments. But I do want to make both domestic and international students better aware of diversity being an inalienable part of college learning. One colleague offered me a very interesting proposal: last year, I brought my class to a local Chinese restaurant. Predictably, all the American students ordered “safe” choices like sesame chicken, broccoli & beef, orange chicken, etc., whereas the Chinese students ordered dishes prepared in authentic Chinese ways with names American students never heard of (I made sure the Chinese students would only order vegetables, pork, chicken, or beef. In other words, ingredients were the same but cooked in the real Chinese way). This year, this colleague suggested – how about NOT allowing the American students to order? Instead, they will try the dishes ordered by their Chinese classmates, knowing the ingredients are the same as their familiar, “safe” ones.

The bigger point is this: as “inconsiderate” as the idea may appear at first sight – this is actually what Chinese (and other international) students have to deal with almost every day at DU’s dining halls – they simply do not have a choice. I like this idea. I may even ask the class to share their thoughts on this experience in the form of a short memo. I am sure this will be a very memorable experience to all – a meal that makes everyone realize diversity is not something one can always choose. Rather, it is a fact one has to learn to deal with (and enjoy)!