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Students Are the Best Teachers

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What We Learned from Co-Teaching an SWS Class

As part of my job as SWS Director, I'm expected to teach SWS classes, and it seemed most appropriate to co-teach classes with various faculty so I could observe the program in action, and so faculty could ask questions about incorporating writing with their curriculum. In fall 2000, I spoke with Assistant Professor of Sociology Sharon Preves about the possibility of co-teaching one of her winter SWS sections of SS 300, Social Science Research Methods. Sharon was eager to collaborate, as she was interested in what she and her students could gain from the increased focus on teaching writing. We'd like to focus here on two of the main things we learned from our teaching collaboration: 1) the importance of comprehensive assignment design, and 2) the ways of using peer feedback to improve students' learning and writing.

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We chose Sharon's Tuesday night class for our team teaching, as it met just once a week, which made scheduling and planning easier for our work together. Sharon and I met a few times in December and early January, before the semester began, to discuss the class syllabus, the assignments, and my role in the class. At that point we imagined ourselves each having a very distinct role: Sharon would teach research methods and I would teach writing. By the third week of the course, we realized our first mistake—we were both writers and teachers. Our preconceived notions of "writing teacher" and "research methods teacher" were too narrowly defined for how we operated in reality. Even more important, such a stark division of labor was problematic because it gave students the impression that the two are separate—learning about course content and learning about writing—when in fact, the writing of content clarifies, demonstrates and deepens learning.

To minimize students' perception that I taught writing and Sharon taught sociology, it was important that both of us provide assistance to students with their writing and research projects. Equally true, the writing issues that arose were not strictly about mechanics and grammar. How could they be? Rather, the most important issues were tied intimately to the disciplinary conventions of the social sciences, this research methods course, and specific assignment expectations. When considering student writing, we wondered:

- Was the introduction broad enough to connect readers to the student's field of research and yet narrow enough to point the reader toward the paper topic?
- Did the overall structure and organization of the paper work well?
- Were the points within the paper logical?
- Could a reader follow what the writer was saying?
- Did the writer use research terms and approaches in a coherent manner?
- Were there sensible connections between sections of the paper?
- Was the writer credible?
- How did the student establish that credibility?

Such questions about papers made it fairly easy for us to see how writing and content were intertwined. But to help ensure students saw the connections and saw our roles in the classroom as equal, we planned classroom activities that demonstrated our expertise beyond Denise-the-writer and Sharon-the-sociologist. For example, one night I offered feedback on the first assignment by using overheads with examples from student papers to lead a discussion of problems and solutions which dealt with the kinds of questions raised above, problems of content development or clarity in writing. That same night, Sharon used overheads with examples of writing from her research which demonstrated some of the key elements we expected to see in their research, such as how to effectively write and incorporate field notes. Before this class period, students had been asked to complete one set of field research observations and field notes, so that they would have one set of notes to work with during class discussion. Using her own field notes as a basis, Sharon demonstrated the difference between writing research up, and writing research down. She distinguished between these two types of writing by showing examples of field notes she had recorded, or "written down," during her field observations, and how she had "written up" the same field notes by incorporating excerpts from the same field notes into a formal paper.

Such activities helped establish us both as writers. We never sought directly to establish me as a research methods expert; I'm not. So while it's true that I never lectured on research methods, my role in the course did go beyond writing faculty. For example, one night Sharon and I sat across from each other in a large circle with all of the students to discuss field research topics and locations. Students presented their topics and were asked questions about the logistics of their research plans—mostly by us, but also by other students. I was involved in questioning their plans and introducing potential problem areas. Though I am not a social scientist by training, my interdisciplinary background in American Studies did include ethnographic research. More importantly, the process in the classroom discussion circle was one of detailed questioning which is my forté as a writing center director. At the beginning of the session, students directed their reports almost entirely to Sharon, but by the end of class, there was more fluid eye movement around the circle as each student sought feedback from both of us so they could adjust their research plans.

Our collaboration not only raised our awareness of the interplay between teaching writing and teaching content, but also of the importance of assignment design and clarity of objectives in eliciting a desired product from students. The importance of assignment design cannot be underestimated. In this situation, Sharon had taught the course several times and had been working to develop a structure and assignments that worked well. When we met in December, she introduced me to two different approaches she had taken in teaching research methods. Previously, she had used a fully developed research proposal as the main writing project in the course. Another time, she had tried using two main research projects: one based in qualitative research and one in quantitative research. She'd developed a series of elements that she wanted covered in students' papers to accompany each project. Using the research proposal as the primary writing task had displeased her because she found that one semester didn't allow her enough time to teach students various methods of research and have them apply that knowledge in their own research proposals. Yet, at the same time, having students complete field research and survey research projects without conducting any literature review seemed to fall short of her objectives for the course. So when teaching the course this time she wanted to combine the previous assignments by using the qualitative and quantitative assignments and adding a literature review component to the qualitative project. This would require students to do some library research and be able to integrate it in the context of research while maintaining the primary focus of the course on active learning by having the students conduct original research using a variety of methods. In terms of what she had learned from previous experience with GVSU students, this seemed like a good combination. However, by focusing only on the way Sharon had taught the course in the past, we neglected to look at how the new assignments were being used to meet course objectives. That led to some interesting challenges as the class progressed. Let us explain.

The course was composed of three writing assignments, two of which were to be revised based on feedback from faculty and peers. Students were graded on peer feedback to increase their motivation to take their roles as readers and reviewers seriously.

The first assignment was a quick write-up of a norm-breaching exercise. In this assignment, students were asked to study the basic elements of social deviance: 1) shared normative expectation; 2) violation of the norm; and 3) social response to the norm violation. Keeping ethics, safety, and laws in mind, students were instructed to identify a norm, violate the norm in two different settings, and observe and record responses to their norm violation. They were to write up their expectations, their findings, and ethical concerns. This assignment was worth five percent of the overall course grade. The assignment was given the first night of class, and due the next class period. During the second class, each student offered written and verbal feedback on one of their classmates' papers before the papers were handed in. Both assignment and feedback were designed as opportunities for students to become interested in conducting research and to demonstrate to them that they already possessed many of the skills they needed to conduct and write up research. This was also a low-risk opportunity for students to get feedback from instructors on what to pay more attention to in future assignments.

As we had hoped, the first assignment generated excitement about research through the norm breaching they had done; they were invested in the class. Though the papers lacked introductions and had many common first draft problems, like places where the logic wasn't clear, they were good efforts for a quick five-point assignment. From these first papers I collected examples which I presented on overheads in class as described above. I used examples of problems and allowed students to read those examples and explain what was wrong. I also used good examples so that they could see the ways other students had avoided such problems. I also used overhead examples from the peer feedback they had given one another so we could discuss what kinds of feedback work best to help writers locate problems.

The second assignment, a field research project, took six weeks, the remainder of the first half of the semester. For this project, students received 30% of their grade for the class: 20% for the paper, 5% for providing feedback on another student's paper and 5% for an oral presentation to the class. Students wrote their paper in stages, getting peer and faculty feedback on each component of the paper as the assignment progressed. For the written assignment, students needed to compare two observation periods from their field sites, describe the field sites, and explain the methods they used, patterns they observed and any ethical concerns they encountered during their research. These items basically demonstrated an application of the material covered in the course. In this assignment, Sharon decided to assign students a brief literature review which required that they incorporate at least three scholarly studies related to their own research into their papers using summary and comparison. This assignment was approached as if it were a fully developed research paper, with the components and tone of a professional research article. Students were asked to offer one another feedback on their papers just before adding the literature review. On the night that the literature review was due, Sharon and I had individual meetings with the students to discuss their progress on the assignment.

There were several problems with this assignment. The largest problem was with the literature review. For one thing, it came late in the process as an add-on, which came directly from our process of the assignment design being based on a combination of two previously used assignments. For this project, students had already selected, designed and carried out at least half of their field research before they began to hunt in the library for relevant sources. Typically, a literature review occurs at the beginning of the research process. It allows a researcher to find out what has already been done in a field and determine a niche to fill. That wasn't necessary for students to complete the assignment. In fact, this class was on research methods, so the focus was on research methods more than on conducting research itself. With this focus in mind, students were encouraged to find library sources on their topic and their research method; this dual focus seemed to further confuse students. On the night that Sharon and I had individual conferences with students, when their literature reviews were to be finished, we found that very few had attempted to write anything up yet. Most were still collecting sources and wanted to discuss with us whether the articles they were finding "fit" with their research and the assignment. It was difficult for students to find articles directly pertaining to the focus of their observations, as many of them were studying micro-level phenomena that they found hard to connect to broad level research topics such as chivalry, shopping behavior, or the public display of physical affection.

Beyond the literature review students hadn't written introductions. This was not only a problem for the papers, but also a problem when they tried to offer each other peer feedback. The peer feedback forms, which mimicked the assignment sheet, began with a question about the introduction (see Appendix A). This caused students great consternation since they were being given points for feedback and weren't able to answer the questions: "Does the introduction set the research in a context? Does it draw the reader's attention?" This illuminates problems with our assignment design, as well as students' perception of what counts as "real writing" (e.g., a formal paper), versus writing that doesn't really count. Here's an excerpt from the assignment sheet:

For topic statement due January 23:

> Identify your field research topic and setting. Why is this topic appropriate for field research? Is your method of research exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (see Babbie pp. 91-94)? Is your research inductive or deductive? Give detailed explanations for each of these questions (see appendix B).

We imagined that the topic statement would become an introduction. However, we didn't write the description of the topic statement with an introduction in mind. Nor did we make clear to students that once they'd written the topic statement that included necessary introductory elements, they should then revise it for that purpose. For them, it was an isolated piece of writing that didn't "count", meaning it didn't generate any points. So they wrote for class but didn't consider using it in any way for their full-blown papers.

Further, we'd never looked at the overall purpose of the assignment. While we put it forward as a formal paper, there were elements that suggested it was really an instrument to assess students' learning. For example, the assignment sheet was broken into tasks that met particular criteria of course content such as whether the research would be inductive or deductive. On the surface, it seemed that a student could just add a sentence to a paper to address such items. However, such elements are not typically found in professional papers. By asking students to answer such specific questions, we were really testing whether they could apply terms that they were learning in the class. There were conflicting assignment objectives. Were we asking students to write a formal research paper or were we essentially giving students an extensive take-home essay exam?

The small elements of the assignment (e.g. topic statement, lit. review) were intended to break up a large paper into stages to make it more manageable for students to accomplish so the tasks were also set in a date due order. But we neglected to recognize how the testing and formal paper goals conflicted and lead to problematic transitions between some of the assignment's components. An example of this was the topic statement that didn't smoothly translate into an introduction which drew the reader's attention and set the context for the research. On the night we conferenced about the second assignment, the lack of introductions was particularly puzzling for us because it was something that we had addressed after finding a similar lack of introductions in the first assignment. After reflection, we concluded that students were sticking very closely to the assignment sheet as their primary assignment guide, and that its organization had led them away from including formal introductory paragraphs.

Despite not having introductions at the full draft stage and despite struggling with literature reviews, students made enormous progress between feedback and final drafts. One thing we clearly did well was to focus on larger order concerns for feedback. By this, I mean that we focused on clear thinking and development more than grammar or punctuation. This was evident in the length of their papers—an average of 3 ½ pages longer at the final draft than at the feedback stage. On average, 1½ pages of this was the addition of the literature review which leaves an increase of 2 pages elsewhere in the paper. That's significant in papers that ranged from fewer than 4 to 13 pages.

Since students were graded on their feedback as well, we examined their written feedback closely. The best feedback was specific and thorough. It often asked questions of the writer and suggested what more might be included or how something might be written differently. For these characteristics to emerge, the person offering feedback needed to address the writer directly and not seem to be watching over their shoulder for what the faculty thought. This could be seen most clearly in notes that used the writer's name. For example, 1) "Jim—I would discuss your reason for the topic of choice" and 2) "Could you include more notes later in the paper instead of in only second paragraph?" The best feedback was also often made in questions or in "I" statements which didn't presume to understand the writer's intent and which gave feedback as a reader, a peer, someone who could, in restating an idea, let the writer know whether or not the writer had conveyed clearly what she or he intended to convey.

The second half of the semester was spent on the third assignment, a group survey design project. Students received twenty percent of their grade for their individually written survey design papers, plus an additional five percent of their grade for providing peer feedback, and for a group oral presentation. For this assignment students worked in teams on creating, refining, and administering a questionnaire or survey. Then as a group they entered their data into SPSS (the Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Students' sample sizes were so small, that only descriptive statistical analyses were performed. As this was a research methods class, and not a statistics class, students spent more time analyzing the research process itself—how well did the instrument work and was data collection done in a manner that could generate useful data? Then students wrote up responses to a series of questions and discussion prompts on their assignment sheet.

By the time we reached the point at which students began writing their final assignment, we recognized that this assignment was also more of a testing document rather than a full-fledged paper. We already had the course set up for them to offer feedback to one another on this assignment, so we continued with that plan. But instead of a feedback document that asked about the specific details listed on the assignment sheet, we discussed with the class the evaluative purpose of the paper. With the testing purpose in mind, we asked them to generate a list of possible areas for feedback. They came up with two writing based concerns and two test-based concerns. Students responded to three papers: one from their own survey group and two from other groups, so they could see how a member of their own group was writing up their group work, as well as learn more about what topics and methods other groups in the class were using. They gave each other feedback on reader confusion and asked that the reader underline any type of surface error that they noticed like spelling, grammar or punctuation. They also asked if any of the assignment sheet questions went unanswered and whether or not technical terms were used correctly. With the technical terms as with the grammar and punctuation, they didn't expect that they'd all get them completely right. So they asked that readers note questions they had about terms so that writers could choose whether to look them up or whether they trusted their own knowledge.

The idea of having students read the writing of more than one student during peer review came from GVSU professor Paul Huizenga, who uses this technique in his medical ethics class. Paul said that students learned a great deal about the ways of fulfilling the assignment by reading multiple papers. As faculty, we read hundreds of student papers a year, but students don't typically have the experience of reading a variety of their peers' work. When they have the chance to read other students' writing, they learn a great deal about the possibilities—good and bad. They discover ways of organizing they've never considered. They read sentences that amaze them, giving them ideas about style and voice for their own papers. And they discover, as readers, the things we point out to them over and over again—the need for context, the essential quality of detail, the critical features of argument. As writers, they find it difficult to understand some of these comments because they know the context and detail, and they believe the arguments they are trying to make. But as readers, the lack of these qualities is much clearer. The problems presented are obvious. They learn from their peers' mistakes and they imitate their successes.

As for their writing, students got feedback about where they confused readers and areas that readers thought might have surface errors. In terms of testing, the feedback seemed to function as a study session. As readers, each student needed to assess whether or not others were using terms correctly, and as learners, they needed to assess whether or not to they needed to clarify their knowledge. This seemed to work for students both as they read others' papers, and when they turned to revise their own drafts. Responding to someone in their own group allowed students a chance to see how someone else wrote up the same material. This presented a good opportunity to learn about the variety of ways to write. It also required them to consider various interpretations and conclusions their peers made in the group research process, potentially suggesting changes to their own papers. By reviewing two papers from other groups, students had to think about the application of terms and theories in contexts beyond their own survey projects.

One of the things we would change about this class if we had it to do over again would be to have the students read papers from several others throughout the term, instead of only for the final assignment. Reading a draft of more than one peer's paper on every assignment would be better for two reasons. First, it would give students more context earlier in the term rather than later and second, the first two assignments allowed more freedom in terms of organization since the final paper served more of a test function. The openness of structure in those early assignments would have given students more models to emulate. Their willingness to make structural changes was seen in this class during the second assignment, when at the feedback stage, only two students had used subheads for sections of their papers. One of our follow-up instructions to the whole class was to explain how subheads work in terms of organizing writing. We pointed out that the articles they were using for their literature reviews probably had subheads and that one advantage to that structure was that transitions between major elements of the paper could be carried in the subheads. At the final draft stage, thirteen of twenty-one students had used subheads. This demonstrates one of the important reasons for including the teaching of writing in the disciplines. While first-year writing classes, like our Writing 150, teach the importance of transitions, they seldom have assignments which call for subheadings. But in the social sciences and sciences, subheads are important features. Once students recognized how subheads functioned and that they could use them, they did so with great success.

The assignments for this class had many good elements, but we hadn't considered them comprehensively. That lack led to several problems, which we learned from during the course of the semester. Mark Waldo of the University of Nevada, Reno suggests that faculty design assignments to have clear goals, engaging contexts and specific audiences. The assignments in this research methods class had engaging contexts without a doubt. Students enjoyed designing their own research projects and carrying them out. For the most part, they even seemed to enjoy writing about those projects and the methods they used. But as we've already pointed out, the goals were not as clear for us or for our students as they might have been. Testing situations are very different from other kinds of writing that we do. And perhaps one of the ways of seeing those goals more clearly is to think about audience. If the audience is the faculty member only, the goal is more likely to be testing. Testing certainly has its place. But whether or not students need feedback on that type of writing and whether or not the structures involved in writing are as critical is questionable. In testing, demonstrating knowledge is the most important element. Having a faculty audience means writing for a superior. Whether that's student to faculty, faculty to dean, or employee to employer, it is never easy. It puts the writer in an insecure position, certain that the reader knows more. Often that reader has power over the writer as well. It's difficult to be clear, succinct, or persuasive in that context. Better that we write for peers, which can be daunting enough. But that's what we do as academics. When we write journal articles or books, we write for our colleagues. If what we've learned about students reading one another's writing is any indication; writing for and reading our peers' writing works well in many regards. We learn about the limitless possibilities of structure, style, and scope by seeing how others approach their work and asking them to read and respond to our own.

In working together, Sharon and I also learned a great deal about faculty and peer feedback as it relates to writing. During our last class session we administered a survey about the writing aspects of the class to the students. Not surprisingly, students responded that written feedback and feedback from faculty were preferred. Yet that doesn't give a full picture of where students learned the most. In response to the question, "If feedback for writing had not been integral to this class, would you have sought feedback from other students before turning in your papers?" Twelve students answered "no" and five answered "maybe," while only three said "yes," they would have sought student feedback.

Of the seventeen students who answered "no" or "maybe" suggesting they would probably not have sought feedback from their peers on their own, eleven answered "yes" to the question: "Did you learn anything about writing from giving advice to your peers in this class?" So, though eleven students wouldn't have sought or offered peer feedback on their own and they don't prefer it, they still learned about writing from the experience. Of that eleven, five of the students selected "reading other students' papers" as "the most significant influence in your learning about writing in this class." So five students who likely would not have talked with fellow students about their papers actually learned the most about writing by participating in the feedback process with other students. In terms of the eleven students who said they learned something about writing from giving feedback to peers, eight of those said that they "learned more simply from reading other students' papers." Using peer feedback is not just about improving writing. Reading others' papers is a significant learning element of the feedback process that we often don't recognize or utilize enough.

Just as students learn from reading others' work, professors learn from "reading" each other's teaching. Opening up one's classroom, teaching style, assignment design, teaching objectives, grading, etc. really mirrors the process we learned was so valuable for students. The more "exposure" we get to the possibilities in teaching, the better teachers we can become.

APPENDIX A

SS300 F: Field Research Assignment Peer Feedback Form

Your Name
Author of Paper
Title of Paper

1. Does the introduction set the research in a context? Does it draw the reader's attention? How?
2. Does the researcher's description of his/her approach include these elements: inductive/deductive, exploratory/descriptive/explanatory, a reason for topic choice?
3. Does the description of the field research site leave you with any questions? What are they?
4. What did the researcher observe? How did she/he record those observations?
5. Describe the author's use of field notes. Does that use provide evidence and/or support for analysis?
6. Are the comparisons between the two observation times clear? Can you suggest any relationships that were missed?
7. Are ethical concerns discussed sufficiently? Has the researcher missed any possible consequences of their research to subjects or her/himself?

Concerns about the entire paper

8. Is the author's logic apparent throughout the research process (i.e. why setting chosen, how field notes recorded, how conclusions reached)?
9. To assure consistency, note any contradictions found in the paper.
10. What is the most interesting aspect of the paper?

APPENDIX B

SS 300 — F: FIELD RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

In this assignment, you will individually observe people in a public setting of your choice for at least 30 minutes on two separate occasions, for a total of at least one-hour of observations. You will take field notes, perform preliminary analysis of your field notes, and discuss issues of concern to field research.

Your paper is due in segments, allowing time for feedback and revision.

- Topic statement is due January 23.
- Research design, data collection, and results sections are due February 6.
- Review of prior research is due February 13.
- Final paper is due February 20.
- Brief (5-7 minute) oral report on February 20.

Please bring 2 copies of each section of your paper on due dates to allow for peer review.

STEPS IN CONDUCTING FIELDWORK:

1) Think of a topic that interests you and choose a public place where you may observe behavior related to that topic. It must be a place where you are able to make careful and relatively inconspicuous (covert) observations. Choose a place where you might expect to see different types of people or behavior, depending on the time of day or night of your observations. You may choose any setting that you want as long as it is open to the public and safe. Some possible settings for observation include a supermarket, department store, clothing store, book store, restaurant, cafeteria, coffee shop, bar, lounge, pool hall, bowling alley, video game parlor, barber shop, hair salon, playground, park, courtroom (if open to the public), stadium, field house, sporting event, athletic club, workout center, library, museum, gallery, theater, movie lobby, zoo, airport, train station, bus terminal, laundromat, etc. Check with me if you are unsure of the appropriateness of the fieldwork setting.

2) Identify your approach to the topic. Will you follow deductive or inductive reasoning? Are there definite behaviors or patterns you expect to encounter and hypotheses that you want to test (deductive approach)? Or, are you going into the field with few preconceived notions of what you will observe (inductive approach)?

3) Conduct at least two, thirty-minute observation periods, each during a different six hour time period (midnight—6 a.m.; 6 a.m.—noon; noon—6 p.m.; 6 p.m.—midnight). Take field notes during the observation period and edit and elaborate on your notes as soon after the period of observation as possible.

4) Make a diagram or map of the setting, with an indication of the place(s) you occupied while observing.

What To Include In Written Reports:

For topic statement due January 23:

• Identify your field research topic and setting. Why is this topic appropriate for field research? Is your method of research exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (see Babbie pp. 91-94)? Is your research inductive or deductive? Give detailed explanations for each of these questions.

For design, data collection, and results sections due February 6:

• Briefly describe when and where you conducted your field research and locate yourself within the setting physically. Include a visual aid to diagram or map the field research setting with an indication of the place(s) you occupied while observing.

• Discuss your method of taking field notes both during your observation and immediately following your observation. How did research subjects react to your presence?

• Report your findings: Were there any recurring patterns that you observed? Were there any unusual or atypical behaviors that you observed? Were there differences in the two time periods you observed? Explain what might account for why these differences do or do not exist. Use quotations from your field notes to provide evidence for your reasoning.

• Discuss ethical concerns that arose while conducting your fieldwork. How might or how did you resolve such concerns?

For literature review due February 13:

• Incorporating at least three scholarly studies, write a brief summary of previous research in this area. What types of research methods were used? What are the competing theories or interests in understanding this topic of study? What are the strengths and weaknesses of prior research?

• What would you do differently in your own research, if anything, if you had the opportunity to revisit this topic? What did you find particularly frustrating, appealing, or interesting about the process of conducting field research?

Final paper due February 20—include all of the above sections, including your drafts to illustrate feedback and revision.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN BRIEF ORAL REPORTS: FOCUS ON METHODS AND PROCESS

• Introduce your topic.

• Describe your field site. Incorporate your prepared visual aid (e.g., overhead, tag board drawing, etc.) to diagram the field research setting. In your diagram, indicate the place(s) you occupied while observing.

• Discuss your method of taking field notes both during your observation and immediately following your observation.

• Identify your role in the research setting. How did research subjects react to your presence? In what ways did your presence change the situation?

• Briefly describe your findings.

• In what ways did your reaction to the setting (on both occasions) affect what you observed or how you interpreted your observations?

• Mention any ethical concerns.

• Discuss what you would do differently if you were to conduct a similar study again.