
(1989)

Using Drafts in History 231: American Economic Development

William L. Taylor

When first confronted with the concept of using drafts in history courses, I believed that it would result in much more work for me and only limited results for students. After attending the first Writing Across the Curriculum workshop, I was willing to take a chance and try it in the critique assignment required in HI 231: American Economic Development.

What convinced me to experiment and continue after the first effort in the classroom? In the workshop conducted by Toby Fulwiler, concepts discussed and experiences shared persuaded me that the potential extra effort would be more than offset by the final results. First, instructors did not necessarily have to read entire drafts, but only the first page or, depending on length, pages. Second was the likelihood that students would be willing to work on improving their writing. Third was that second or subsequent drafts by students would prove far more literate than the first.

My original concept in assigning a critique was to encourage students to improve their writing and analytical abilities which are so essential in a world ever more dependent on those able to understand and to convey information. Frustration in grading this assignment occurred regularly because of the seemingly wasted

effort of correcting and commenting on papers at the end of the semester. Despite extensive commentary, I had the distinct feeling that the comments were ignored and that all of my efforts went in the “circular file.” Upon altering the process a couple of years ago, I had a quite different sense of the consequences of my efforts. Now students could use my comments and suggestions in their revisions with the result that the final effort would incorporate thoughtful revisions and careful review of what the student sought to achieve.

The overall conclusion from this effort over the past two years is not only positive but also reinforces my sense that students have recognized the benefits for themselves. Course evaluations conducted in December 1988 confirm this observation. What seems to occur is the sense that writing can be done initially without incurring any penalty. This reduces anxiety and allows students to take risks without any immediate fear of failure.

The final results are usually much improved—sometimes after two, even three, revisions. When I grade the final submission, I retain a sense that my efforts have resulted in positive reactions which brought about actual efforts to improve the writing. The students seem to recognize that they have the opportunity to improve their work and do so in a non-threatening environment.

I do not wish to imply that this format is less work than the old way of only commenting and grading a “final copy.” What makes it worthwhile is the sense that students become motivated to improve their work and that my comments and efforts are used in a way that enhances the learning process. Isn't that why we sought a career in teaching?

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A response to Bill Taylor's article

Roy Andrews

I witnessed the effectiveness of Taylor's responding techniques while working with his students in the writing center. Minimalist response focused entirely on the thoughts being conveyed. Just a few words. An occasional word of encouragement when an interesting idea was pursued. A suggestion for major change when someone was off track. Taylor's response said a lot in the fewest possible words, launching the students into thought, but never doing the thinking for them. The students were being prodded to think and write like historians, but within those broad limits they were encouraged to think for themselves.