
Writing in Psychology Courses

David Zehr

In the summer of 1986 Toby Fulwiler made his first presentation to PSC faculty about that era's higher education catch-phrase, "writing across the curriculum." Unlike other such expressions that grab their fifteen minutes of fame and then disappear, thankfully, into the netherworld of intellectually bankrupt jargon, there was something different about WAC: it made sense. My memory for that time may be less clear twelve years later, but I do believe that pre-WAC, many of us were still locked into the attitude that one assigned writing for limited purposes. Students wrote term papers that usually entailed some sort of library research and faculty corrected them, usually focusing on content and mechanics. Toby's presentation helped change that attitude by articulating **and** reinforcing the idea that academic writing serves multiple purposes. It is indeed a wonderful tool for learning a subject matter and mechanics, but in addition, it is also a tool that allows students to go beyond what they expect a professor wants them to say; it is a tool that helps them learn to think on their own.

Several Psychology faculty participated in that first WAC workshop and many others have since participated in later ones put on by PSC faculty and staff. Not surprisingly then, WAC techniques are evident in all levels of the psychology curriculum, from large introductory survey courses to advanced senior seminars. Below is a sampling of techniques provided by my colleagues. Collectively, these techniques illuminate the resourcefulness and creativity of individuals who value the power of writing

to help students better understand what a higher education is really supposed to be about,

Using Writing in Introductory Psychology

PS201, Introduction to General Psychology, is an SP perspective for the college's general education program. Since all general education courses are expected to have a writing component, it is not surprising to see that psychology faculty have developed a variety of strategies that meet this extraordinarily important objective.

a. Using writing to expose students to current research. One faculty member assigns students readings from *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal that publishes cutting edge research reports. A nice feature of this journal is that the articles are usually short and written in a nontechnical manner. Therefore, even though the journal is of great value to professional psychologists, its contents are also highly accessible to students getting their first taste of the discipline. Students select articles to read from the journal and then write brief reports. The professor provides several general questions to guide their responses. The articles typically coincide with topics covered in lecture and the regular textbook.

This assignment works well for several reasons. First, it exposes students to original source materials in psychology. Second, it reinforces the principle that our knowledge of human behavior is not fixed, but ever-changing. This is a very important lesson, particularly for those who will not go beyond the introductory level in psychology. Last, the writing assignments are not graded with a traditional letter grade. Instead, a check, check-, no credit system is employed. Dissociating grades from writing in this manner shifts a student's focus from the evaluation of the writing process to linking ideas in the article with other course materials.

b. Using writing to enhance critical thinking. Another member of

the department assigns a series of thought-provokers to students. These are exercises which require students to apply what they have learned in class to new information. For example, students might be asked to find an article about behavior in a popular medium and then critique it using critical thinking skills. Or, students might read an instructor-generated vignette about a behavioral problem and then use their knowledge of psychology to solve it. These assignments are graded on a pass/fail basis, and so again emphasize writing as a thinking tool as opposed to a means of formally presenting information.

A second example of using writing to teach critical thinking are some techniques I use in my introductory psychology course when covering research methods. Over the years I've used a variety of writing exercises not typically encountered in a beginning psychology course. Students have written one-act plays, short stories, and Dear Abby-like advice columns for a fictitious campus newspaper. Since details of those assignments are found in earlier editions of the *Writing Across the Curriculum Journal*, I won't elaborate further. I believe it's enough to say that the assignments are designed to use creative writing techniques to teach material that students usually find both difficult and dry.

c, Using writing to teach content. Using writing to teach critical thinking skills is, obviously, only one purpose of a writing assignment. Writing assignments can also be used to enhance students' understanding of basic psychological concepts. For instance, in one section of introductory psychology students write short papers on topics from the text and lecture. An illustration of this approach is drawn from a unit on psychopathology. Students are asked to select a psychological disorder they'd like to know more about. They write a paper on the disorder that includes information on symptoms/diagnostic criteria, etiology, and treatment. Written responses help students integrate and apply what they've learned from class. The instructor also uses the written responses as a stimulus for class discussions.

Writing in Other Psychology Courses

a. *Prenatal and Infant Development*

The instructor of *Prenatal and Infant Development* uses writing to expose students to materials not covered in the text. After hearing a lecture on a “special topic,” students write brief summaries as a check on their comprehension of the material.

This course includes a service-learning component. Students are required to keep a journal of their service-learning experiences. The journal allows students to relate their service-learning experiences to issues presented in class. It is also a vehicle for students’ personal reflections on the experiences.

Teaching to in Experimental Psychology

All psychology majors are required to complete a year-long sequence in research methodology and statistics. By the end of a student’s second semester in the sequence, they should have all of the requisite skills needed for conducting an independent research project, which they are indeed required to do. This includes preparing a literature review, designing the study, data collection and analysis, and a final research report written according to the stylistic guidelines of the American Psychological Association. Not all instructors get students to a final draft of a scientific research report using the exact same methods, but all do use at least one common strategy—the writing of multiple drafts. Only a naive and unsuccessful student (or researcher for that matter) believes that a first draft of a research report is good enough to be a final draft. Students in Experimental Psychology learn quickly that revision is the key to successful writing. Revision is guided and encouraged through peer review, professor-student conferences, and meetings with the staff of the College Writing Center.

contemporary research and theory in historical perspective; the present is eminently more comprehensible when viewed within a larger context of what has come before. Because this course integrates historical information with content from other psychology courses, writing is used as a means of encouraging students to view history as more than a collection of names and dates. In one section of the course the instructor has students write weekly papers based on lecture and assigned readings. Responses to these questions must reflect a student's own ideas and supporting documentation. Simply repeating ideas from the text or lecture is a sure-fire way to earn a low grade. The weekly assignments are augmented by more comprehensive writing assignments, the nature of which varies from semester to semester. Once, students wrote biographies and professional genealogies of Psychology Department faculty. Another time, students role-played being members of an historical figure's research team. They were required to design and conduct an original experiment reflecting their mentor's influence and present the results in a formal report. No matter what the specific nature of the assignment, the overall goal is the same—to actively involve students with psychology's history.

e. Psychology Seminar

All majors are required to complete an advanced seminar as a capstone experience. Since seminars rely extensively on discussion and individual or group presentations, students need to come to class fully prepared to offer their own unique ideas, opinions, and insights. To prepare students for this, one instructor requires extensive readings of original source materials and emphasizes the need for students to go beyond merely summarizing what they've read. Specifically, students are expected to write a formal review of the literature for a topic that relates to both the seminar's theme and a student's particular interests. Adherence to APA writing guidelines is required. A second faculty member who has taught the seminar uses writing to achieve the same overarching goals mentioned above, but does so using what he calls the HTS

method. Students read original published research reports. This exposes them to the content that is crucial for establishing a working knowledge base of the material. Beyond that, however, for each article they must also engage in Hypothesis generation (What new questions/testable hypotheses are raised by the research?), Theory integration (Can a theory be generalized to a new context or compared to a competing theory?), and Substantive critique (What are the strengths and weaknesses of a study/ what might have been done differently?).

f. Integrative Courses

Several psychology faculty teach Integrative courses for the General Education program. As one would expect, writing plays a seminal role in student learning. For instance, in *Lifecycle in Film* students write papers integrating course materials, e.g., theories of moral development, with film analysis. The instructor provides a question sheet for each film that guides student viewing. Student responses to the questions form the basis for both class discussions and a more formal writing assignment. In *Psychology and Literature* students read great works of literature and analyze the plot and characters using influential psychological theories. One recent writing assignment used in this class as a final exam had students write a two-part paper. First, the students wrote a short story. Then they wrote a critical essay (similar to others they had written about literature assigned) which analyzed a character in the story using the perspective and terminology from one of the psychological theories presented in class. Both instructors also completed this assignment and shared their papers with the students at the final class meeting.

Summary

The above is just a limited sampling of the ways in which psychology faculty use writing to enhance student learning. A great deal has been omitted out of necessity, for a comprehensive overview would have left little room for discussion of writing in

other disciplines in this volume. It should be obvious, though, that students benefit tremendously from the variety of writing exercises to which they are exposed. Psychology faculty are genuinely committed to using writing as a tool for teaching students about how psychology is done; they are also committed to using it as a tool to enhance students' perceptions of themselves as independent thinkers from whom we all have much to learn.