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Using Writing Across the Curriculum in Economics:

Is Taking the Plunge Worth It?

Avi J. Cohen and John Spencer

The American Economic Association-commissioned report “The Status and Prospects of the Economics Major” states that in order to reach the central pedagogical goal of helping students learn to “think like economists,” instructors could integrate the *writing across the curriculum* (WAC) approach into the teaching of economics (Siegfried et al. 1991, 211). In this article, we report on a collaboration between an economist and a writing instructor in using this writing-to-learn approach into a history of economic thought course. The collaboration includes ongoing consultation on designing assignments and feedback to stu-

Process Orientation: Recursiveness and Revision

Traditionally, the writing process has been taught as a series of discrete linear steps: analyze the assignment, research the available information, create a central

controlling argument, make an outline of the points to be included, write a draft, and then edit. Students usually presume that as each step is completed, the writer moves on to the next without ever returning to previous ones. In adhering strictly to a linear writing approach, students revise only by editing at the sentence and word level. This limited conception of revision not only produces weak papers, but more important, fails to take advantage of writing as an act of idea generation.

This is not how experienced writers write (Dougherty 1984). They follow a recursive writing approach, moving freely back and forth among the steps of researching, planning, producing, revising, and editing as they discover new ar-

should remain open to reworking the thesis and reorganizing evidence. As they write more consciously for their reader, students will further generate new conceptions. Even this stage is best understood as a recursive, not linear, activity.

Audience

Students face a unique difficulty in clarifying the audience for whom they are writing. In most writing situations, the writer writes to inform a reader who is

generally less knowledgeable. In sharp contrast, students are asked to write for a reader (the instructor) who is clearly more knowledgeable. This places the student writer in an artificial and hence difficult situation.

One solution is for the instructor to create an imaginary reader to serve as a more "realistic" audience for the student. A generic naive but educated reader, a professor in another course, or a fellow student in the discipline can each serve as an effective imaginary reader.

Response to Student Writing

On the other end of the writing process is the feedback that instructors provide to students. In a course concerned with improving student thinking and writing, it is important to have students write a number of papers and to give them opportunities to rewrite. Because comments on papers provide the basis for improvement, the response to student work becomes a critical component in the

averaged 30 students per semester. Each course required an in-class midterm, a final exam, and a 15- to 20-page term paper.

For many students, this was the first economics course that required a paper. Students usually chose from among the suggested paper topics, which identified an important issue and involved instructions like "compare," "discuss," "evaluate," or "explain and comment." Papers were mediocre, regurgitative, and uninspired. A typical paper would often competently describe the issues and relevant authors' points of view. It would fail, however, to make the reader care because

the information was not tied to, nor motivated by, an organizing thesis. Fre-

an afterthought.

In the terminology of WAC, students were submitting writer-based prose. They would string together their writer-based reading notes with minor sentence and word revisions. When a thesis did appear at the end of the paper, the writer-based stage had been useful in helping the students *discover* their argument. What was necessary (and lacking) to turn the paper into effective reader-based prose was an extensive revision process that would reorganize the material

ing arguments.² The course content remained the same, but the in-class test and the exam were eliminated and replaced with the following requirements:

<u>Due</u>	<u>Percentage of course grade</u>	<u>Task</u>
Sept.–Nov.	15	Three 1-page abstracts (with revisions)
Oct. 22	15	4- to 6-page paper
Dec. 7	35	10- to 12-page paper
Dec. 20	35	Take-home final exam

Abstracts

Students were asked to think of their reader as an intelligent undergraduate economics major. Because other students would ultimately use these abstracts, the actual and imagined audiences became identical, eliminating the artificiality of the student author writing for the expert professor.

At the end of the class, we presented two sample abstracts of the Boulding

ing strategies like brainstorming, freewriting, and mind maps)⁴ and formulating an effective thesis.

After distinguishing between the process of writing and the end product that

enced writers and their global and ongoing vision of revision. We discussed transforming writer-based prose into reader-based prose around a controlling the-

story is told of a student who, after picking up a heavily red-penned paper from the professor's office, waves it despondently in the air and says to a friend, "Look, my poor paper is bleeding!" Students simply cannot absorb too much feedback. Focused feedback is more effective in helping students improve their writing. The hierarchy of concerns dictates prioritizing suggestions for revision. Those priorities are reflected in the ordering of categories on the abstract and paper response sheets (Appendixes A and B): (1) clear thesis, (2) paragraph structure and supporting arguments, (3) logical progression of thought in relation to purpose, (4) appropriate audience, and last, (5) use of language and conventions.

Given the primary objective of teaching students to think like economists, it is not worthwhile spending 20 minutes marking the spelling in a paper that does not have an argument. This does not send the signal that spelling is unimportant,

a student's perspective, the WAC course has the disadvantage of demanding more work. As a consequence, enrollments may drop (they dropped by roughly one-third with our restructured course format). On the other hand, advantages for

exams.

The most important advantage is the sense of accomplishment students derive

other purposes and the VAC approach can be applied in many ways. For all of

these reasons, taking the plunge is well worth the effort.

APPENDIX A Abstract Response Sheet

Student Name:

1. Clear statement of purpose/subject of article:
(2 inches of blank space)
2. Paragraph structure; supporting arguments:
(2 inches of blank space)
3. Logical progression of thought in relation to purpose (without unnecessary digression or repetition):
(2 inches of blank space)
4. Audience:
(2 inches of blank space)
5. Use of language and conventions:
 - A. Sentence structure (conciseness, clarity, and precision):
(3/4 inch of blank space)
 - B. Word choice:
(3/4 inch of blank space)
 - C. Definition of important concepts:
(3/4 inch of blank space)
 - D. Verb tense:
(3/4 inch of blank space)
 - E. Punctuation:
(3/4 inch of blank space)
 - F. Spelling:
(3/4 inch of blank space)
 - G. Citations:
(1 inch of blank space)
6. Other comments:
(2 inches of blank space)

APPENDIX B Paper Response Sheet

Student Name:

1. Clear statement of thesis/subject of paper:
(2 inches of blank space)

D. Citations:
(2 inches of blank space)

6. Other comments:
(4 inches of blank space)

NOTES

1. The approach in writing across the curriculum stresses the integration of the teaching of writing

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Strenski, E. 1988. Writing across the curriculum at research universities. In *Strengthening programs for writing across the curriculum*, ed. S. H. McLeod. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Effective Economic Education in the Schools

This book outlines a process of curriculum change. During the 25-year history of the Developmental Economic Education Program (DEEP), economic education in the schools has

expanded greatly. In **Effective Economic Education**, you will learn about the history, the successes, and the challenges of what has become a model for business and education

partnerships. Over 40 percent of the nation's student population has been involved in DEEP. No other curriculum change process has sustained success for so long.

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