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Writing Instruction Report Regarding Activities Stemming from Summer 2014 Backwards by Design Retreat

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In the retreat I sought assistance as I developed a new course, a senior seminar in industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology, a writing intensive course. The field is an applied one with many practitioners working as consultants. During the workshop I decided to use the consultancy relationship as the foundation for the writing assignments.

Students selected one case of many I shared with them as their focus. After doing research and interviewing professionals with knowledge of this content area, students proceeded through a series of writing assignments (Table 1), focusing on ‘business writing’ and switching back and forth between two audiences, customer and client, across the assignments. Twice during the term we met with Writing Center and Research support staff in the library.

Initially students were very enthusiastic about learning “practical” writing practices and skills. They had written traditional research papers in prior classes, but claimed they had no experience with the business genres. Similarly, their library skills inside the research literature were strong but they had little familiarity with finding vendors or tools and evaluating them for a client.

Students quickly came to ask for instruction on this business writing genre as well as for examples, both good and bad. The retreat facilitator endorsed the practice of sharing examples, which I had been reluctant to do. So, I began accumulating good and bad examples and sharing them with the students.

I was very pleased with the student work that emerged. It was a small class and so having students resubmit assignments following feedback led most students eventually to receive A’s on the majority of their writing assignments. Between drafts students clarified their description of key concepts, adjusted their voice to be more suitable for customer or supervisor, and strengthened the recommendations they made or the evidence supporting the recommendations.

Here are design aspects I picked up from the workshop that I incorporated in the class:

- Assigning complex cases/problems with no easy answers.
- Peer review.
- Multiple drafts
- Enhanced/more detailed assignments.
- Rubrics shared ahead of time
Feedback to the writers that was less detailed and more focused on the ideas, arguments, idea progression, and audience than I had ever done previously. I gave feedback on the 'big ideas' rather than the mistakes and details of grammar. My old habits were hard to break and I was glad I could redo my feedback electronically without having to cross out comments on hardcopies of students’ papers.

Submission and grading of assignments through Canvas was a godsend, something I tried thanks to encouragement by workshop staff and faculty. Students were very good at submission and processing their work through Canvas. For my work as instructor I ended up printing more documents than I had expected to better track students’ arguments, progression and reinforcement of ideas, and cross check references, etc. Students were not the only ones improving as the term progressed.

This fall I will use and improve the writing components of this course. I will have more resources (e.g., writing samples) to support their writing, greater facility with Canvas, and some advice prior students left for future students. I will continue to trust the advice of the workshop experts and faculty and continuously improve the writing components of this course.

Table 1: Consultancy Assignments.