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

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WRITING INSTRUCTION REPORT

Submitted by Catherine Riordan

Regarding activities stemming from Summer 2014 Backwards by Design Retreat

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.

Scenario: Assume you are a newly hired associate in a consulting firm owned and managed by an IO psychologist, Betty. Betty is the one who received the request for assistance and she gives it to you to work on. As your mentor she wants to help you learn the ropes but to do so independently; as company owner she wants to provide quality service and also to promote future business possibilities for her company.

She shares the request she receives with you and gives you the following assignments:

1. Review the letter I received and **prepare an internal memo** to me summarizing the key issue(s) and some possible next steps we could take. To avoid the practice-research gap please review recent original empirical or archival research relevant to this problem(s) and summarize the relevant point(s) for me in this memo. This memo will be for ‘my eyes only.’ Our discussion will serve as the basis for the next step.
2. Prepare for me a **letter** to this potential client that responds directly to the questions asked and raises other issues that must be explored in order to answer the questions. In this response extend on my behalf an offer to meet with the client to discuss possible next steps.
3. The client has let me know s/he wants to take a more thorough approach to this issue/problem in the future and opens the door for us to do one or more formal consultations. Prepare an **internal memo** to me (‘for my eyes only’) summarizing the possibilities, the possible outcomes, the ROI, and cost and time ranges.
4. Based on our conversation, prepare a **written proposal** and plan to deliver it with me, face to face with our client. Send me **preparatory materials** that I can use to get ready for this meeting.
5. Write a **thank you note** for me to send in support of an ongoing partnership.
6. The client accepted our proposal for a next phase. Assume we executed the contract and work as proposed for the first phase. Prepare a **final report** of that

Table 1: Consultancy Assignments.