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Peer Editing as Learning Tool

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Backward by Design

Mini-story Writeup

By Warren Cornwall

Introduction: Environmental Journalism (ENVS 412), is a four-credit, writing-intensive seminar offered through the Environmental Studies Department. When I taught it in the winter 2017 quarter, the 14 students included a mix of people with varying skill sets and past training. Some had experience in journalism but limited knowledge of environmental studies and science. Others were more fluent in environmental fields, but with no experience writing and reporting as journalists.

The course was geared toward students with past college writing experience. A majority were seniors, but there were some sophomores and juniors as well. Students could enter the class if they were majoring in environmental journalism, had completed journalism and environmental studies coursework, or were granted an override. Most students entered the class through an override. There were no first-year students.

This was a new course offering, although a similar course had been offered until approximately 2008. Based on this mix of student skills and interests, I sought to develop threshold concepts for the class that would extend beyond the narrow, specific goals of students seeking to specialize in a field (e.g., people training to be environmental journalists). But I also wanted to address the needs of those students.

One key threshold concept I identified was this: **How to be a skilled storyteller.** This might sound simplistic. Having taught other journalism courses, including the class producing the environmental magazine *The Planet*, I knew it was a vital skill set that students often lacked. It's also one that is valuable in fields beyond journalism. It requires students to think about their audience, understand how to conceive of something as a story rather than simply an issue or idea, and use writing techniques that capture and hold people's attention while conveying key information in memorable ways.

The first set of assignments in the class sought to introduce students to the concept of journalism and writing as storytelling by giving them a small, contained news story. The final end product was a 600- to 800-word news story about a recent scientific study related to an environmental issue of their choosing. They would need to interview one of the study authors, as well as a scientist not directly involved in the study. Their model was a series of New York Times articles written by the journalist Carl Zimmer.

Focus of Study: Peer Editing to Learn Storytelling.

I wanted to find a way to begin teaching the elements of a story (as opposed to an issue or report), and the specific writing techniques used to create a story. I was seeking a method that would encourage students to grasp and then use these insights.

In an earlier course, several students had asked for more structured peer editing as a way to improve their writing. In theory, I liked the idea. It matches the Backward by Design imperatives to get students to understand and apply concepts and skills, rather than simply asking them to receive information. But in practice, I felt students often gave feedback of limited value to their peers. There were comments of “This is good, I don’t see a lot of things to change,” or focusing on basic grammar and punctuation.

I sought out the advice of Brenda Miller, an experienced professor in the English Department who teaches narrative non-fiction. Several students said the peer editing in her courses were particularly productive. Miller showed me a peer editing structure aimed at teaching students how to offer and receive constructive, specific feedback. The peer editing made writers think about their audience (because the audience was right in front of them). It also asked students to understand and apply insights about storytelling and techniques when evaluating their peers’ work. In short, it seemed like a good way to get students to do the detailed work that would lead them toward this threshold concept of storytelling.

Here is the structure, as implemented for this assignment.

1. **Students read a “model” story that demonstrates the writing concepts and techniques you want them to use in their own writing.** In this case, it was an article written by Carl Zimmer about a recent scientific discovery contained in a new study. It was related to the environment.
2. **Students identify and discuss different elements of the story related to these concepts and techniques.** This was done through a short written assignment, followed by a discussion in class in which students and teacher “dissect” the story in question, looking at the different elements, discuss what makes them effective and possible ways to do it differently. They are, in essence, peer editing the model article. (The written assignment is [included with this document, p. 5]. See “Zimmer Story Analysis.”)
3. **Students then apply these insights while writing a first draft of their own story about a scientific study.** There were several earlier writing exercises designed to prepare them for this first draft. I won’t detail them here, to keep focused on the peer editing.
4. **Peer editing following a script.** On the due date for the first draft, students brought four printed copies of their assignment for peer editing. At the start of class, I handed out a peer editing “script.” The script explained the goals of the peer editing, the rules of conduct (respectfulness, detailed feedback, active listening), and the process. It also had a list of specific questions the editors should keep in mind while reading and responding to their peers’ work. Those questions echoed the observations they made about the model Zimmer article.

Here is the basic process:

- A. Students are placed in groups of three or four. The assignments are random.

- B. Students read over the script. I lead a brief discussion of the goals of the peer editing, how it relates to the threshold concept, and the details of how it will unfold. Students are prompted to ask questions.
- C. One student hands out copies of their story to the members of the editing group. That student briefly explains any particular feedback they would like (e.g. questions or challenges they are facing).
- D. Students then silently read the story, using the questions in the script to guide their reading.
- E. After finishing (approximately 10 minutes), peer editors give their feedback to the writer. They give that first by addressing each of the questions in the script. The discussion is guided by one of the peer editors, who volunteers to take on the role of “advocate.” The advocate initiates the discussion with an observation about the piece, and helps to ensure the discussion remains respectful and constructive, and that all people have an opportunity to speak. A different person acts as advocate for each story. The writer’s role is to listen, seek clarifications or ask for more feedback.
- F. Twenty minutes are allotted for each story. At the end of the time, the editing groups end their discussion of that story, and start the process again with another person’s story.
- G. A copy of the script is attached as “Example_Science Story Workshop Guidelines.” It is based almost entirely on a script kindly provided by Brenda Miller.

Observations: During the peer edit, I observed students by sitting at the edge of each group for minutes at a time. I did not actively participate in the editing. I also observed the groups from a bit further back in the class, to watch several groups at once.

What I saw:

1. Students read quietly, jotting notes as they read.
2. Discussions were animated and focused on the stories. A number of students offered detailed and specific feedback addressing questions posed by the script. They frequently referred to specific passages in the story to demonstrate their point.
3. Discussions were respectful and constructive. I didn’t witness discussions where I felt any need to intercede.
4. The editors and writer were engaged for the full 20 minutes (there was not dead time when people started checking phones).

Feedback: The following class, I asked students to write a brief assessment of the peer editing experience. The questions were this: What would you change about the peer editing process? Do you want to do it again on future assignments? Why?

Students handed those assessments in. We also had a short discussion about their assessments.

The results were:

1. All students said they would like to take part in peer editing for future assignments.
2. Common themes for why they wanted more:

- a. The peer feedback helped them understand how to improve their stories.
 - b. The appreciated the immediate feedback right after the assignment was completed.
 - c. The appreciated the script as a guide to assessing the writing.
3. Other themes
- a. There was confusion about the role of the advocate. Were they supposed to be arguing on behalf of the writer's story? In later peer editing, I dropped the term advocate in favor of calling them the "discussion leader."
 - b. Some students who didn't fully complete the writing assignment said the feedback would have been more helpful if they had a more complete story. The script was aimed toward complete stories.

Current and future plans:

Based on my observations and student feedback, I made the peer editing a fixture in the class. For two other major writing assignments, early drafts went through a peer editing process. Each time, I followed the structure explained here. The questions were modified for the specific assignment, as were the model stories. We spent less time discussing the peer editing process, as students became more familiar and skilled at it.

I have since introduced peer editing to the Planet class in the spring 2018 quarter. I followed a similar structure. Those have been well received. When I solicited written feedback from Planet students halfway through the quarter, a frequent request was more peer editing. I plan to make peer editing a key element of the Environmental Journalism course when I teach it in winter 2019.

Overall, I think peer editing, when properly structured and introduced, helps students gain valuable insights into the writing, storytelling and editing process. A special thanks to Brenda Miller for her guidance.

Zimmer Story Analysis

Intro: Since you are taking the place of Carl Zimmer and his column at The New York Times, you need to understand the inner workings of his articles. How are his stories structured, what is their style and what information is in them?

Theme: To do that you will read and analyze two recent stories by Zimmer.

Product: A short analysis (400 total) answering several questions about two different articles written by Zimmer.

Rationale: The goal of this assignment is to help you understand the style and techniques Zimmer uses to write an interesting news article about a new study. You can then apply those lessons to your own story.

Assignment:

1. Read the following article by Zimmer:

- [Hot Spots in a Freezing Ocean Offer Lessons in Climate Change \(Links to an external site.\)](#)
[Links to an external site.](#)

- Answer the following questions
 - The start of a news story, called the lede, needs to catch a reader's attention and make them want to read further. What does Zimmer do in the lede to make it interesting?
 - What was the key finding in the study? Notice that Zimmer uses clear, simple language to describe it. Pick out one or two sentences you think illustrates Zimmer's use of clear language to describe a study's findings.
 - Look at the quotes Zimmer selects. What are some characteristics of these quotes (type of language, length, content)? What purpose(s) do they serve in the story?
 - How does Zimmer end the story? What is one other way he might have ended it that would be effective?
 - Zimmer's stories are structured to convey information in an interesting way, and to ensure they provide the information readers will want (the study's major findings, their significance, how the study was done, what scientists involved in the study and others independent from the study think of the results, etc.). Print out a copy of each story. Mark the different sections of each story based on their purpose (for example, a section that describes how the study was done). Write down the names of the sections in the order you find them. You can use your own terminology to name the sections. BRING THE PRINTOUT WITH YOUR NOTES TO CLASS ON WEDNESDAY! WE WILL USE IT TO GUIDE OUR DISCUSSION.

Mechanics: Submit responses via Canvas as a Word document.

Grading:

- Complete answers to each question.
- Proper grammar and spelling.
- Evidence of detailed and thoughtful analysis.