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# Incorporating Academic Writing into the Advanced Chinese Class

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# Mini-study for Backwards By Design Retreat 2017

Li Wang

## Background

At the 2017 Backwards By Design retreat, the main task I set for myself was to redesign essay assignments for Chinese major's capstone course CHIN401. In the past few years, this course's writing assignments focused solely on language aspect. I asked students to write 3 to 4 essays. When I graded their essays, I corrected mistakes related to grammar or word-choice or sentence structures. But that kind of assignments was not successful because at the end of the course, students still had difficulty to write good essays in Chinese. They did not get much training in Chinese writing itself. During the Backwards By Design retreat, I learned that I could combine the language training and writing style training together. Moreover, I could teach students how to write step by step. Therefore, when I taught CHIN401 in the Fall 2017, I asked students to write 4 sections of one long argumentative essay. In the first class which was assigned for writing, I told them key concepts about argumentative writing with the special emphasis on how to write the first paragraph. I also asked students to think deeply about why they wrote in that way when they wrote. When I graded students finished first paragraphs of their chosen topics, I focused on both language and writing aspects, and provide suggestions on how to revise them. Students should revise their first paragraphs accordingly and handed their revised versions. In the second class for writing, I taught students how to write the second/ third paragraph of an argumentative essay, such as, How to write a topic sentence? How to develop one's argument? How to support one's arguments. When grading students' second writing, I also payed attention to both language and writing aspects. Students also need to revise their paragraphs accordingly. In the third class for writing, I trained students how to write a good conclusion. We analyzed some essays' conclusion part to let them know what kind of conclusion can be called a good conclusion, what kind of conclusion was less effective. In the fourth class for writing, we explored how to connect different parts together logically and cohesively. After that students should combine those sections together and hand in a completed argumentative writing at the end of the term.

## Results/Observations

The change of CHIN401 assignments in the Fall 2017 brought some positive results.

- 1) In the past, although there were writing assignments, writing did not effectively incorporate into the CHIN401. Such kind of situation was not conducive to the objectives of the course: besides training students' four skills, reading and writing skills were especially important for students in their advanced level Chinese. The redesigned essay assignments intentionally incorporate writing into the training of other language skills.

- 2) In the past, writing essay was treated as a way to reinforce students' knowledge on language. But the redesigned essay assignments also required to teach about writing itself. Although CHIN401 only focused on academic writing, which is to teach students how to write argumentative essay in Chinese, students gain some consciousness about writing itself, such as writing form, writing style and so on.
- 3) The redesigned writing assignments also used the concept of backwards by design. In their writing, students were asked to reflect their writing process, such as they were asked to think about why they started their essay in that way, why they chose that example, why they developed their ideas in that way, and so on. They should think through their writing first before they wrote.
- 4) The newly designed writing assignments also effectively connected all writing activities in that term. All writing assignments worked for one purpose: to write a good argumentative essay.
- 5) Students also learned the importance of revision. In the past, when there was no request for revision, students just put their paper away after taking a brief look. But in the Backward By Design, I also learned that a good paper is a revised paper. Therefore, I provided revising suggestions and asked students to hand in their revisions. Their revisions also counted into their essay scores.

## **The future**

In the future, when I teach advanced Chinese courses, I will use this redesigned writing assignments. But I plan to make the writing relate to all students more. Instead of letting students choose a topic related to what we learn in the class, in the future, I will teach students how to write an argumentative essay in their study area in Chinese. For example, if a student majoring in Business, I will teach him/her to write a paper related to Business. Moreover, I plan to combine the writing with presentation. Students should also present their essays when they finish their writing.