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Including the Obvious: Why Are We Doing This?

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Abstract:

Along with including the usual sections for “what” to do and “how” to do it, when developing an essay writing prompt, providing a section to explicate “why” students will be completing the assignment results in a significant improvement of the quality of essays received, as well as a noted improvement in student ability to connect with several of the overall Student Learning Outcomes of the class. This write-up examines shifts made in assignment construction, as well as the results of that shift as realized in a 200-level Queer Literature course.

While participating in the Writing Instructional Support (WIS) retreat in August/September, prior to Fall quarter 2022, I got excited about the potential of creating more of a “buy-in” for students around the critical thinking / writing assignments for the English 227 (Queer Literature) class I would be teaching in the Fall. One of the difficulties I have found with this class is the wide variety of students who take the class. The class usually has a majority of Freshmen students in their very first quarter of college. Along with those students, I also get Seniors across many disciplines, both related and unrelated to the study of either literature and/or queer studies, as the class is a General University Requirement (GUR). I have students who feel personally committed to the material, as an extension of their exploration of identity, as well as students who are simply rounding out their registration with a class that fits their schedule. For this reason, the class must be catered to learners at all levels of connection with the material. A unique experience, indeed.

The class has historically involved a few weeks of establishing historical and political context of the material we will be discussing, giving the students a few class periods of lessons on queer history, both political and cultural, from antiquity to the present day, as well as some reading, conversation, and exercises around privilege and positionality. Which helps the student understand both the positions from which the writers are writing their work, as well as the positions from which individual (in this
case student) readers are interpreting the work. I have taught the class both as a survey of 19th and 20th century queer literature and as a more focused course in a specific aspect of Queer Literature. This fall we focused on Literature of the AIDS crisis. For this, we began with a poetry packet and learned the basics of literary analysis on these works. From there we moved on to an anthology of personal essays, *Between Certain Death and a Possible Future: Queer Writing on Growing Up with the AIDS Crisis*, edited by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, which details individual experiences with the AIDS crisis, those growing up and coming into their sexuality during the AIDS crisis, and those who came of age in a so-called post-crisis culture. Much of what was discussed in the anthology had to do with our responsibility toward our own health, our responsibility towards the health of intimate partners, and our responsibility towards community health. Following this, we read two more books (Danez Smith’s collection *Don’t Call Us Dead* and Jamaica Kincaid’s memoir *My Brother*). The conversation, as one would expect, often shifted from examining literature through the historical context to thinking about the parallels between the AIDS crisis and the public health crisis lived through in our own time, Covid-19.

So that when we reached the midterm take-home essay, it was my goal that the students should be able to practice literary analysis skills as well as analysis of historical context and be able to connect these ideas to their own lives and thinking about responsibility during crisis.

The specific question I began addressing during the WIS retreat was the following: In what ways does breaking a major assignment down into the constituent parts of “what” to do and “why” to do it—and expressly labeling these in the assignment itself—enhance student engagement with the assignment and critical thinking about the course materials in English 227?

In the past, my written assignments themselves has tended to focus on the “what to do” rather than the “why.” While much of the explanation of “why” that goes into an assignment has historically happened through lecture and conversation in class. One element of the WIS retreat that was revolutionary to me, though perhaps it should have been obvious, was writing the explanation of the “why” of an assignment directly into the assignments themselves. This is a practice I engaged in for all major assignments in the class, from the midterm to in-class presentations to the final project.
For this write-up I am including the midterm assignment because it is the one I worked on during the retreat itself, though the practice has been instrumental all the way through the final (all 75 of which I have spent the last five days grading).

Below is the midterm assignment, with the “why” section highlighted.

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English 227 – QUEER LITERATURE – Midterm Assignment
Due Friday, October 28 by midnight on Canvas

In this assignment I would like you to consider the following questions as explored in the essays we have read so far this quarter and the conversations we’ve had, as well as your own understanding/opinion of these questions:

What, if any, is our responsibility toward our own health? What, if any, is our responsibility towards the health of those around us? What, if any, is our responsibility towards community health? How should we conduct ourselves with respect to these concerns? How do the writers of these essays address these concerns?

For your midterm paper, you should not simply answer these questions one after the other, but use the reading you’ve done to serve as an exploration of these questions. It is probably best to draw up an outline of thoughts / essays you’ll discuss before launching into writing the paper.

Some of the essays we’ve read have explored these questions head on. For some of these essays, you may infer from the author’s actions or experience their relationship to these questions. (Be sure that you are able to provide evidence for your inference.)

What to do: In this essay (of approximately 1000 words), you will choose one to three essays from our textbook (Between Certain Death and a Possible Future) and discuss the ways in which these writers examine the relationships between personal, moral, and social/political responsibilities in managing a deadly epidemic. Your audience will consist of your instructor and your classmates in this course, so you can assume they have also read the text. For this reason, you will not need to give a full summary of the essays you reference, though you may want to give a sentence or two of context as a reminder to those readers.
Why: This assignment is designed to help you to gain a fuller understanding of and ability to discuss queer history as it relates to the AIDS crisis and its continued effects on queer people directly after the crisis as well as queer people today. This assignment will also help you practice your close reading and analysis skills by asking you to focus on specific moments in the text and discuss those moments in terms of craft elements and how they support what and how the writer conveys in the information or position they convey.

Note: a bibliography or works cited page is not necessary, if you are only using our textbook. However, please use MLA style citation within the body of your paper.

Suggestion: consult with the Writing & Research Center for additional help: https://library.wwu.edu/rws
Some questions to consider as you write:

- What is the writer’s positionality? How do they frame this information for the reader?
- How does this positionality effects their understanding and experience of the issues encountered in the essay?
- What is tone of the piece? How does this tone affect a reader’s experience of the essay?
  - (Remember that tone is a writer’s attitude toward the material or the narrative at hand. For example, if the piece is told in a light-hearted or comedic way, but they are talking about serious issues, how might that effect your experience of the essay?)
- To choose the craft elements you’ll discuss: What stood out to you most when you first read this essay? What do you think is most interesting? Why?
  - (How do these elements and the answers to these questions inform your understanding of the text?)
- Analyzing the craft elements: Consider the themes, ideas, and craft elements we’ve discussed in class. How does the author use these to get their point across? (e.g. metaphors, structure, syntax and style (straight-forward or more lyrical), repetition, pacing, development of setting, etc.)
  - Be sure to include specific, concrete moments (quotes) from the text.
- Be sure to think about organization and transitions between your ideas.
- What overall thesis / main idea are you working with? Is it clear, arguable, and focused?
- What is the topic sentence of each paragraph?
- Why have you chosen to present these details / moments from the text in this order?
- How do each of these ideas support your overall thesis?
- Conclusion: What does all of this add up to? How has your progression of thought built upon / complicated your initial thesis statement? Have you taken us on a journey?
The outcome realized from these shifts was a significant decrease in the number of students seeking additional supports through office hours and emails in the days leading up to the due date of the assignment, as well as a significant increase in the number of essays with a clear and focused progression of thought. While without a scientific examination of before (prior midterm essays and a detailing of the clarity of their constituent elements) to compare with the midterms submitted this quarter, it is hard to give an accurate portrait of the improvements realized from this shift in approach to writing assignments, however anecdotally, as well as mentally and emotionally (as this has been a difficult quarter in many ways), the overall improvement in the crop of assignments submitted—both the midterm and other major assignments, including the final—has produced a significant easing of the level of difficulty in grading the assignments themselves. The improvement in writing assignments with the “why” factor written into the assignment directions seems to have been produced in a significant increase in clarity for the students process and in their writing as well, as evidenced by an increase as well in the average grade received. Through this assignment students were able to connect more clearly to the Student Learning Outcomes of the class...

— Become more familiar with the histories of queer experience, community, and identity in the U.S.
— Gain a fuller understanding of and ability to discuss the basic elements of literature.
— Acquire techniques of close reading and textual analysis of literary genres.
— Gain a fuller understanding of and ability to discuss the breadth and depth of queer literature and art and the relationship to social justice movements.
— Improve critical thinking and critical writing skills.

... most significantly a slight improvement noted in student use of critical thinking and critical writing skills and substantial improvement in students’ ability to gain a fuller understanding of and ability to discuss queer literature in relation to issues of social justice, as they connected to the material personally through their experience of the Covid-19 crisis and the parallels noticed with what they learned of the AIDS crisis. They experienced as a result an increased ability to clearly discuss queer history as it relates to the AIDS crisis and its continued effects on queer people directly after the crisis as well as queer people today.
While many factors may have played a part in this improvement, including class dynamics, which was strong throughout the quarter, that the essays were improved as a crop of essays (rather than just individual essays), I believe the improvements made to assignment writing, learned during the WIS retreat, played a significant role in student improvement and ability to meet the student learning outcomes as a whole.