

The Teacher

Disarming the Hunter: Improving Administrative Writing in the Classroom

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The teaching of writing within academic disciplines, known as writing across the curriculum (WAC), has gained momentum in traditional undergraduate programs. A recent teleconference featured WAC programs at UCLA, Clemson, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Prince George's Community College, Spelman College, and Robert Morris College (*Issues*, 1991). The call for incorporating writing skills within existing coursework has come from a variety of disciplines as well; specifically, in political science, Goodman and Lanser addressed this issue in 1987. They pointed out that writing is inseparable from the practice of political science (1987, 61), an observation that may be even more pertinent to those students who enter graduate programs in public administration. This article, while concentrating on writing within public administration graduate programs, speaks to issues that concern all teachers whose students intend careers in public service.

Agreement among those who teach and those who practice public administration seems to be clear: writing skills are important. The National Association of Schools of Public Administration and Affairs has included in its accreditation standards the expectation that MPA programs will graduate students who can write clearly. However, former presidential management interns revealed in a survey that, although they ranked communication skills as the most important component of their public administration education, they rated their programs as poor or very poor in providing written and oral skill development (Dennis 1984).

Competent writing skills are not the exclusive concern of public

administration education. In the natural sciences (Woodford 1967), concern for competent writing has been expressed. Private sector executives have complained about the lack of writing ability among recent graduates from business schools (Speck 1990). Management education has been criticized as emphasizing technical and quantitative skills over such

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“action skills” as communication (Denhardt 1987).

Public administration programs do pay attention to student writing. Some require submission of written material as part of the admissions process (Bowman 1988). Others have sequenced or modular programs in oral and written communication in order to develop and enhance student skills in those areas (Cigler 1990; Newell and Glass 1978). A recent article encouraged the inclusion of writing skills in the MPA curriculum (Hambrick 1990).

The emphasis in the public administration literature has been on writing outcomes, familiarizing students with the kinds of products they will (or do) encounter in the field. Tradi-

tional academic writing tends to reward length, extensive documentation, wordiness, and academic jargon (Speck 1990; Hershkowitz 1988). Many students have been faced with a 1,000-word requirement when 500 words would cover the subject adequately.

In fact, practicing public administrators tend to write short issue papers, memoranda, summaries, and correspondence. They may be asked to compare the costs and benefits of different computer systems; to develop a policy paper on community-oriented policing; to prepare a response to citizen complaints about poor utility services. While each course offered in public administration has the potential to provide practice with short, concise papers, this writing alternative is not always offered.

The public administration literature is also apparently silent on writing skill pedagogy. With neither appropriate textbooks nor pedagogical discipline-specific direction, those who wish to work with students on administrative writing skills have virtually no specific curricular support. Of course, few faculty are very far removed from their own writing and most know how to design and assign writing tasks. However, knowing how to write and assign writing requires different skills from knowing how to *teach* writing. How then can public administration faculty address the teaching of writing processes that results in successful products?

One solution is to send writing-deficient students to the campus writing center. This is a helpful alternative; faculty can work with the specialists in these centers to help severely inadequate writers. How-

ever, two factors restrict the usefulness of these special support services. First, most MPA programs have substantial numbers of employed students who have difficulty gaining access to traditional programs designed for the on-campus, full-time student. Campus writing centers have restricted hours or are located where quick access (a parking space during the lunch hour, for example) is impossible. Second, many MPA programs have teaching centers outside the campus boundary. For example, the University of Wyoming MPA program enrolls 80% of its students at off-campus locations, none closer than 50 miles from the main campus at Laramie. Innovative teaching approaches, such as teleconferencing and intensive weekend seminars, permit students in remote locations to take advantage of the MPA; but some support services, such as diagnosis and treatment of writing problems, have not caught up with these changes.

Moreover, public administration prides itself on preparing students for the public management profession. Who better than public administrationists should know what is expected in the discipline? For example, MPA graduates may find themselves working for busy decision makers who require massive amounts of information to be collected, collated, analyzed, and massaged. Then this material must be summarized into a one-page memorandum that is logically organized, concisely written, and understandable to a variety of audiences ranging from experts to the totally uninformed. This skill could be practiced in any course requiring extensive readings. The academic discipline, then, is the appropriate locus for teaching not only the written products expected but also the style (Dick and Esch 1985).

Writing skills improvement should not be limited to those with deficiencies. Faculty who send just the poor writers to the writing lab may be neglecting an equally important task—improving the skills of good writers. By including writing improvement in the classroom, instructors have the opportunity to help poor writers become competent and competent writers become excellent.

Writing Skills Approaches

The writing-across-the-curriculum field has developed literature useful to public administration faculty for working with students on their writing skills. While some MPA programs may choose to institute a separate course for teaching writing, what follows is designed to be included in the existing curriculum.

Types of Writing Assignments

What kinds of writing projects are appropriate to a particular course? Writing assignments that bear some relationship to the types of products expected in the workplace, are relevant to the course goals, and that are

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vehicles for improvement are ideal. Both Cigler (1990) and Hambrick and Snyder (1978) have made suggestions that are useful for incorporating writing assignments into course goals. If writing skills are to be improved, the most appropriate assignments are short papers: article reviews or critiques, memoranda, letters, issue papers, executive summaries. Instructors can review and return these quickly to the student for revision.

An instructor who wishes to encourage creativity and the free flow of ideas may also want to use informal types of writing. Free writing (Elbow 1975), the zero draft (1988), or journals (1987) are three approaches that deemphasize concern for mechanics.

If we consider writing as an expression of our thinking, then journals (daybooks or learning logs are two other similar modes) allow the writer to explore his or her thinking process. Given an assignment to write about *how* they arrived at an issue they are researching, students have an opportunity to confront their

own thinking, to reveal the discomfort that precedes discovery, to objectify their thoughts (Maimon *et al.* 1989). One such journal assignment is to have students write about how they conceptualize and revise a policy analysis paper while they are also producing the formal paper itself.

Free writing is brainstorming on paper, writing for a short period of time, usually ten minutes, without stopping or regard for spelling, sentence structure, organization, or punctuation. This practice may be unsettling to those who edit their work as they proceed, choosing only the precise word or phrase that suits the text. However, once mastered, the free-writing technique can alleviate writing blocks or generate combinations of ideas previously unrealized.

The zero draft is a variation on free writing and useful as the first step in developing a report. The draft is ungraded, unrevised, unstructured, and unedited writing, designed to transfer ideas from the student's brain to the page. This has been called a hamburger draft "because you can add the mustard and stuff later" (Tavers 1988). The zero draft does not need to be reviewed by the instructor; it can be a private place where the student feels comfortable to explore an idea before settling on a topic.

Specifying the Audience

Each writing assignment should be preceded by clear instruction and class discussion about the intended audience. Increasingly, public managers are required to present program issues to multiple types of audiences (Dennis 1984). By varying the types of audiences that a public administrator might face, the instructor can help students gain an appreciation for the different kinds of style and content they need to inform others.

Content and how it is presented is shaped by the expected audience. How much information about this subject can the writer assume the audience has? For example, a report on disposal of hazardous wastes will be written quite differently if being presented to environmental engineers or to a county commission.

If a specific audience is not an explicit condition of the assignment, students will most likely assume that their only audience is the instructor. In this case, students often perceive, correctly or not, that the instructor is an expert and knows more than the student writer. Therefore, students find themselves trying to demonstrate mastery of what their audience already knows for the purpose of obtaining a grade. As such, it is the most inauthentic of writing situations. While this practice is certainly legitimate, it denies the student the opportunity to experiment with the variety of writing styles needed for the heterogeneous public sector.

Setting Goals

The instructor should set clear goals for writing competencies in the course (Tavers 1988). What are the critical skills the students are expected to exhibit? Both the writing-across-the-curriculum and the technical writing literature contain useful listings of writing skills. Lannon (1988) suggests four qualities by which to judge a written document: content, organization, style, and format.

Content: Is the subject worthwhile? Does the piece make sense? Does it contain the essential information? Is the information substantiated?

Organization: Does it have a clearly written problem or issue statement? Are the ideas in logical sequence? Are the relationships among the sentences coherent and understandable?

Style: Is it appropriately written for its audience, its readers? Are the ideas expressed concisely and clearly? Do the words express precise meaning? Is the writing free of jargon? Is it written at the appropriate level of formality or informality for the audience?

Format: Is the layout appealing? Is the form appropriate for its intended audience? Does the form follow the conventions in the field?

Students' ability to achieve success in these areas then becomes the basis of the instructor's evaluation.

Evaluating Student Writing

Students are helped more by knowing what to do rather than what *not* to do. Terse comments such as "awkward," "wordy," "poor sentence structure," do not really help a student learn to correct these difficulties any more than telling beginner skiers that all their moves are wrong will help them maneuver the slopes in an upright position. After all, most students do not intentionally submit work that they believe is awkwardly written or wordy; if they have handed in such a piece, they may not know how to avoid these difficulties.

Instead, the actual evaluation of the student's writing should be done in the spirit of encouraging the stu-

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dent to improve rather than reinforcing the image of the teacher as a "hunter for errors" (Walvoord 1982). An instructor who red-pencils writing errors, especially by combing through material for every comma splice, misplaced apostrophe, or incorrect verb tense, can demoralize and sometimes paralyze a student's future writing attempts. In MPA programs a substantial number of students have not been in school for 10 or more years. Older students have been found to feel tentative and anxious about their ability to achieve in the classroom (Connors 1982). Perhaps a metaphorical shift from teacher as hunter to teacher as coach reflects the appropriate technique for encouraging students to improve their skills. In this instance, the teacher as coach is one who gives support and encouragement as well as specific suggestions for improvement.

Better approaches are available to those who wish to spend their grading time more productively. One way to handle student submissions is to diagnose major errors only. This can

be accomplished by reading through the piece without making any marks. A separate sheet of paper can be used if the impulse to make notations is irresistible. A marginal check mark where a problem exists is an alternative method. At the end of the paper, the instructor can comment on what he or she perceives to be the major problem. What is the student doing that needs correction? What can the student do to make the correction?

The instructor, after reading through the paper, can prioritize problems, beginning with the overall impact of the paper and working through the major ideas and presentation. The student works first on clarifying the purpose of the paper; next, on arranging the ideas in logical sequence; then, on mechanics such as spelling or punctuation. This process suggests a hierarchy for treating writing problems. This approach, as does any, requires a clear explanation to the students. They go through a series of corrective steps. The poor writer is not initially overwhelmed with multiple demands. The competent writer sees where text can be improved.

Perhaps this is the place to insert a brief note about performance vs. knowledge-based errors (Walvoord 1982). Even the best writers make language mistakes; a few performance errors are probably inevitable in a semester's complement of writing assignments. However, many errors in a paper can indicate one of two problems: poor performance or lack of knowledge. The instructor can return a paper with a list of the kinds of errors that have been made—misspellings, punctuation, incomplete or run-on sentences—and ask the student to resubmit with corrections. If the student does not make the appropriate changes, lack of knowledge may be the cause for the errors. The instructor can then discuss specific rules with the student or refer him or her to the campus writing center.

Although an iterative process can create additional workload for the instructor, students learn more about correcting their writing errors by revising and resubmitting their work. They have an opportunity to respond to the teaching dialogue that occurs

when drafts of papers are returned for revision with appropriate comments or questions. Critical notes written to students on term papers handed in at the end of the semester are frequently a worthless exercise. The grading is complete; students are not likely to challenge a grade based upon writing errors. They may not even read, at least with full comprehension, the artfully crafted critique from their instructor. To the student, the notes are like a prescription for a dead patient (Walvoord 1982). What they will do, however, is work toward a grade that is not yet earned.

Handling the Writing Workload

How does one keep from being overwhelmed by the writing workload? First, informal writing (journals, learning logs, day books) need not be graded but simply scanned and credited. In addition, the instructor does not always have to review the submission first. Instead, students can work in small groups, sharing their working drafts with colleagues who make suggestions for improvement. Members of the group may feel reluctant or ignorant at first. The instructor can facilitate such group work by providing a framework for discussion. However, as the group continues to work together, students often begin to feel comfortable with and trust one another. The instructor then acts as an observer, mediator, and additional problem solver.

A third workload-reduction technique uses alternatives to written commentary, a time-consuming process. Individual appointments can be included as part of the course requirement. Oral communication may alleviate potential misunderstandings created when the written word does not convey the nuances of the instructor's message. Audiotaping the critique, another option, is particularly appealing to those working with off-campus programs (Weddington 1978). Much more in much less time (thus fulfilling the public admin-

istration value of efficiency) can be conveyed through the spoken than the written word.

Conclusion

Writing cannot be separated from the social and political context from which it originates. The public administration community has a unique awareness of its shared mission to serve both the academic and the practitioner. As such, this awareness should extend to how the community is shaped by its writing behaviors: the audience it serves, the purposes for the writing, and the conventions expected in the writing products. Knowing what makes us distinguishable from other discourse communities and applying that knowledge in the classroom can help us better prepare students for the public administration profession.

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