

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Research Paper? Improving Student Writing through Assignment Sequencing

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So, who is afraid?

- Research has shown that students experience anxiety and stress over the transition to university level writing*
- Process based (sequenced) approaches reduce student stress; allowing choice of topics motivates them (Locke, 2015).
- Teachers experience frustration over poor quality writing

*(Brand, 1991; Burns, 2010; Chandler, 2007)

Objectives

- Introduce the concept of sequencing “research paper” writing assignments for any discipline;
- Offer an example with student and instructor feedback;
- Provide strategies to manage the workload;
- Brainstorm and share ways to utilize assignment sequencing.

Background

- Our collaboration process
 - ▣ Met in July
 - ▣ Corresponded via e-mail; shared resources (e.g. rubrics and course readings)
- Rationale – student population & course goals
 - ▣ Students: Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) entering Year 2 of the BScN program
 - ▣ History re: LPNs & writing skills
 - ▣ Expectations of scholarly writing in the BScN program
 - ▣ Selection of topic

Common Concerns

“Scaffolding takes too much time.”

- ▣ Careful design will ultimately save time and frustration when marking.

“Students don’t like a lot of small assignments. They complain it’s busy work.”

- ▣ Not MORE work, just organized differently
- ▣ Students report that scaffolding reduces stress

“Adds too much to my marking load!”

- ▣ Not everything has to be marked, or marked individually
- ▣ Stagger assignments and use peer review
- ▣ Develop grading rubrics to facilitate marking

Overview of Literature on Sequencing

- *“You don’t teach someone to swim by throwing them in the deep end of the pool... . You have to start simple and work up to it”* (Schimel, 2012, p. 20).
- Students should “gradually move to more complex and unstructured tasks” as “few students can handle complex, unstructured tasks the first time out” (LaSere Erickson and Weltner-Strommer, 1991, p. 74).

Overview of Literature on Sequencing

- Locke (2015) provides an overview of 3 comprehensive literature reviews all pointing to the benefits of a “process approach” to writing.*
- Sequenced assignments pace students through the research, permit early and frequent feedback, and provide thinking time (Lutzker, 1988, p.9).
- Feedback needs to occur early and often to be effective. **

*(see Graham & Perrin, 2007; Hillocks, 2006; Myhill, et al., 2008)

** (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2010 as cited in DePaul Teaching Commons)

Principles for Skill Building Sequence

- Bean (2001, 2011) recommends “several short research assignments or a structured assignment that breaks projects into stages” (p. 212, loc. 5611) that teach:
 - ▣ How to ask discipline appropriate research questions
 - ▣ How to find sources
 - ▣ Why to find sources
 - ▣ How to work sources into the paper
 - ▣ How to manage sources
 - ▣ How to cite sources

Application of Principles: Sequence we chose

1. Workshop: Brainstorming, Refining, and Selecting a Nursing-related scholarly topic of interest to the students

(Amanda taught; feedback from faculty and fellow students)

- ▣ Topic selection -> asking a well-defined question
- ▣ Annotated Bib *(marked by faculty)*
- ▣ Outline *(students pair/share)*

Application of Principles: Sequence we chose

2. Workshop: How to write paragraphs and incorporate research (*Amanda taught; feedback from faculty and fellow students*)
 - ▣ Draft of full paper (*peer evaluated*)
 - ▣ Submit Paper (*marked by faculty*)
 - ▣ Reflection on the writing process

Marking Breakdown

- The following marks /50 were converted to 30% of overall course grade.
 - ▣ annotated bib – 10
 - ▣ outline – 10
 - ▣ Peer feedback on draft – 10
 - ▣ final paper submission – 15
 - ▣ reflection – 5

Using Peer Review to decrease marking

- Utilized a peer review form/checklist currently in use in Year 2 of the program
- Process:
 - ▣ Students submitted draft to teacher without student identifiers
 - ▣ Teacher distributed one draft to each student
 - ▣ Student submitted their Peer Review to teacher -> author of draft

Student Experience: Positives

- *“I feel that these steps helped a lot in the organization and research of my paper”*
- *“I usually write my paper a few days before it is due and don’t make an outline.”*
- *“Making an outline relieved the stress of having to get the majority of the paper done in a short time.”*
- *“I appreciated the freedom we had to choose our topics”*

Student Experience: Positives

- *“I also enjoyed doing the peer review because it gave me the opportunity to see how other people write and cited their works. I found it helpful to have someone look over my work because they picked up on errors that I did not see.”*
- *“I found that she made some excellent suggestions on how to change sentence wording, punctuation, APA requirements and overall flow”*

Student Experience: Negatives

- *“Our class time with the peer review of the outline was a bit too short for me. I could have used more time with my peer to talk about the concepts of our papers”*
- *“The outline was useful when I was still sorting out what I wanted to focus on, but I found it did not assist me much in writing the paper. The final body of the paper took on a different form than I expected, so the outline lost some of its relevance.”*

Faculty Experience

- Scholarly writing & APA resources:
 - UBCO online tutorials
 - UBCO Librarians – direct contact
 - APA manual
 - Purdue
 - Nursing/Health related databases
 - Amanda's handouts
- Reviewing topic & sources for paper in advance
 - Determining suitability of sources is key

Faculty Experience

- Annotated bib
 - ▣ Needs to be scheduled prior to paper draft
 - ▣ Teacher:
 - Read students' chosen articles – time consuming
 - gave extensive feedback
 - anticipate time involvement or have different expectations
 - ▣ Students challenged with identifying strengths/limitations
 - ▣ Need to clearly convey difference between referencing with an annotated bib vs. body of paper

Faculty Experience

- What I would do differently next time?
 - ▣ Remind students that topic may shift -> final paper may unfold differently
 - ▣ Develop a student checklist for determining suitability of sources -> lessen teacher workload
 - ▣ “An Introduction to Peer Review” handout
 - emphasize the points in giving/receiving feedback

Faculty Experience

- What I would do differently next time?

Outline:

- Give clearer expectations*
 - Reminder to include source & page #s for quotes
- Schedule more class time for student peer review of outline
 - sequencing of themes/sub themes
 - topic sentences
 - transition sentences

Outcomes

- Overall the final paper was better quality than the draft
- However, students need continued learning and practice
- In the students' reflection, overall they reported positive satisfaction and learning from the process
- Requiring reflection is a key component

Questions?

- What are some factors that would determine if your course (or assignment) is suitable for sequenced writing assignments?

References

See our resource page for references and other useful resources:

<http://library.ok.ubc.ca/wrs/wrc/faculty-resources/sequencing-writing/>