When the Instructor Writes alongside the Students

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Abstract

By completing the occasional writing assignment alongside the students in their courses, instructors can gain insight into their assignments, grading standards, and writing strategies. This piece presents an extended discussion of an instance where the instructor prepares a set of technical instructions to be used with the students in a professional writing course. While writing alongside the students may improve the communication of discipline-specific expectations and possibilities, the process is time-consuming for the instructor and may produce a model that students are tempted to slavishly follow. The instructor will need to develop strategies to avoid such imitation.

Introduction

Responding to the results of a 1999 evaluation by T.L. Hilgers et al. of the effectiveness of writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs—results showing, among other things, that “teachers see writing as an important learning tool for students but not for themselves” (p. 5)—Kate Kiefer (2003) has argued that teachers who view themselves as “insiders” of a scholarly or professional community, rather than simply as “experts” in one or more disciplines, are better able to teach writing conventions specific to their discipline: “Under this [insider, not expert] approach, writing skills develop as students move from basic understandings of sentences and paragraphs into more sophisticated uses of discipline specific jargon and formats through sustained interaction with an insider who can reinforce conventional usages and discourage unconventional or disruptive communication” (p. 7). Later in her piece, Kiefer draws on Donald Schön’s argument that professionals need to reflect on their tacit knowledge (1983, p. 49), knowledge that they use to complete routine tasks and thus often take for granted. Kiefer concludes:

Teachers engaged in writing—even writing not destined for publication—will become much more aware of their own writing processes and strategies so that they can model these for students (or at least be able to help students see alternatives to their own preferred and tacit processes and strategies). Writing itself can become the jarring or surprising experience that breaks teachers out of routine thinking about the disciplinary content and students’ grasp of it. (2003, p. 8)
When the Instructor Writes

In this concluding point of her essay, the phrase “even writing not destined for publication” comes closest (but still not all that close) to indicating what sort of writing Kiefer has in mind. I hope in my essay to illustrate the applicability of Kiefer’s observations and arguments to the classroom practice of writing alongside the students. I present here an extended discussion of one instance of preparing a set of technical instructions alongside the students in a professional writing course and conclude with an observation about the application of this same practice in a range of other courses. Nearly any discipline can make use of this technique.

In an upper-level professional writing course, I ask students to complete a three- to four-page set of technical instructions on a suitably complex process of their choice. The resulting documents look quite different from many traditional writing projects generated in and outside the university classroom; the pages are filled with concise and single-spaced text, student-generated illustrations, and a judicious amount of white space. (Despite these differences, of course, these documents resemble more traditional genres in a number of ways, including their focus on a specific audience, on clarity, and on a sufficient but not excessive level of detail.) This technical instructions assignment is completed in several stages, including an initial planning document with thumbnail sketches, at least one early draft, and a final draft that accounts for 25 percent of the course grade.

In the 2009 Fall semester, I completed every stage of the technical instructions assignment on my own and formally presented my materials to my professional writing course at least one week before the students’ work was due. In walking and talking the students through one possible approach to the writing assignment, I sought to make visible the highly important but often overlooked choices an informed author makes while drafting a document.

The language of making the writing process “visible” to students is inspired by an essay by Ellen C. Carillo (2009) with the title “Making Reading Visible in the Classroom.” Carillo opens her essay with a quotation from Robert Scholes that addresses the differences between teaching reading and teaching writing. Scholes writes: “we can see writing. . . . But we do not see reading” (2002, p. 166). Carillo moves from this observation into a discussion of the value of what she calls the “passage-based paper,” a particular type of assignment allowing instructor and student alike to focus on the student’s reading practices. This assignment, Carillo writes, “makes [students] slow down and become aware of the process by which they make meaning” (2009, p. 39). While I agree with the challenges of teaching students how to read well and find merit in the passage-bound paper, I disagree with the statement that writing, in the sense of an ongoing process, is any more visible than reading. We see the results of writing, certainly, but the actual processes of writing often remain both inexplicable to the student (the “outsider,” to use Kiefer’s term from earlier in this essay) and unexamined by the instructor (the “insider”). Countless writing manuals and textbooks explain in detail the various strategies and stages of writing, from brainstorming to proofreading, but few of these resources succeed in making visible the informed writer’s many choices over the course of drafting and revising a single document. Writing a set of instructions on a suitably complex process that each of us knows well enough to explain to others in detail, either as the student or as the instructor in the professional writing course, we were prompted, indeed, to slow down, to reflect on tacit knowledge, and to reevaluate the often unexamined processes and strategies that shape and sometimes constrain our writing.

Creating and using the document

The process I chose for my technical instructions document is an intermediate yoga pose, a forearm balance that is usually called scorpion pose, or vrischikasana. To begin my analysis of the process, I had 70 photographs taken of me at brief intervals as I practiced the pose twice. I divided these digital photographs into three groupings—later given the tentative titles “into position,” “kick up,”
and “balance”—in order to identify the major phases of the process as well as the individual steps contained within each phase. In the planning document (see figure 1), I used a table to align a section of the instructions and the first three captioned images of the ten selected into two columns.

![Figure 1: Planning document (photographs by Jamie Satcher, 2009)](image1)

For the first draft (see figure 2), I completed writing the full text for the phases and steps, added a substantial introduction, and concealed the table by setting its borders to “none.” Approximately six to eight hours of work, spread out over a week, went into producing this first draft of the document.

![Figure 2: First draft, page one (photographs by Jamie Satcher, 2009)](image2)

An additional hour or two went into reviewing the textbook chapter on instructions and making a number of corresponding changes to the final draft (see figure 3).
I shared each of these three documents, upon completion, with the students in the professional writing course. I also shared with the students, in fairly general terms, the amount of time and effort I put into preparing each document and the challenges that I encountered in planning, drafting, and revising them. In a cover memo for their final drafts, students similarly reflected on their investment of time and effort in the various stages of completing their own sets of technical instructions. (As an experiment, instructors may wish to request even more detailed work logs from students; such logs may allow for more effective teaching of the various stages of the writing process, as well as for more precise grading of the final assignments.)

I used the instructor-generated documents to supplement the classroom discussions of how students might approach the assignment and, when necessary, to prompt students to revise their own documents more extensively. For example, more than half the students’ first drafts of the technical instructions document, written a week after they had been presented with my first draft, did not present an adequately developed introduction and exhibited a number of other shortcomings. These introductions often did not present a clear definition of their subject, did not identify the level of expertise or amount of time required to complete the process, or did not give reasons that the reader might have for completing the process that they had chosen to explain and illustrate. In reviewing the changes that I made to my own document from the first to the final draft, I explained that I had reviewed the chapter on writing instructions in our textbook, Mike Markel’s Technical Communication (2010), and had followed the relevant guidelines – I pointed students to specific pages in our textbook and to corresponding revisions in my documents. As detailed by Markel (p. 564), I developed my already substantial introduction more fully by adding information about the location and materials required for the process, expanding this section by about one-third. In presenting my revisions from first to final draft, I also explained how I deleted unnecessary words from the introduction, favoring “simple” over “complex” phrasing and using the imperative mood as much as possible (pp. 561, 565). Finally, I talked about how I took to heart Markel’s injunction to “pay close attention to key terms” (p. 541) by reviewing the key terms in my draft for consistency and, using the “find” feature of the word processing program to locate every instance of one particular term, made one change throughout the draft. I explained that I had decided to change my descriptive label of phase two from “kicking up” to “lifting up” because I wanted to use language that conveyed a sense of coming into the forearm balance in a slow and controlled manner, not simply through a sudden application of force. In their final drafts, almost all of the students wrote less text in their documents than I did in mine; but all students did produce
substantially improved introductions and generally exhibited very few errors in word choice and phrasing throughout their documents.

In reviewing the different drafts of my project in class, I made a point of calling attention to the major shortcomings in my first draft and to the corresponding corrections that I made in the final draft. For example, in the first draft, I had forgotten twice to reference the images in the text; *i.e.* left out the parenthetical comment “See figure X.” Similarly, I had failed to include text to accompany the final three figures, which show the person moving into and holding the full forearm balance. I also talked with the students in more general terms about how I realized that I needed to remain open to changes at every stage of the writing process. From the beginning, I found it so helpful to think about larger and smaller patterns in the text—from the organization of the process into phases and steps to the use of particular key words and conventions for capitalization—that I revisited them and made substantial changes in every draft. For example, I changed the phrasing of phase one from “Getting into Position” to “Setting the Foundation” and improved the specificity of phase one, step one (see figures 2 and 3). While discussing the final draft, I was able to recognize and address several items that might be further improved, if time permitted. The brightness and contrast of the figures could have been altered to make the images show up more clearly in a black-and-white handout. My purpose in pointing out these shortcomings in my own work was twofold. First, I sought to demonstrate to students that my project was far from perfect and that, like them, I had to be persistent and thorough yet realistic about time constraints as I worked to improve my set of instructions. Second, I wished to counter the students’ general reluctance to revise. As Wiltse (2000) has identified, there is a tendency among students in general to avoid revising material that has not been singled out by the teacher, even if they believe revision is needed, out of fear that additional errors might be introduced.

After walking and talking my way through my project in its various stages, I invited students to talk about their own projects, using as much detail as they liked. Finally, I made certain to address, in general terms, the shortcomings in the students’ drafts that were not present in all of mine, such as the continued inaccuracies in the breakdown of the process into phases and steps, or the omission in many of the small but necessary articles “a,” “an,” and “the.” (Curiously, when writing sets of instructions, many beginning writers shift into “telegraph mode” and, as if having to pay for each letter that they use in their document, leave out short but important function words, particularly articles.)

**Conclusion**

On a concrete level, writing alongside students can make several important aspects of writing visible in the classroom, such as the value of peer review, the messiness and tentative nature of early drafts, the need for a self-guided process of critique and revision, and—in instances in which secondary sources are used—the challenges in locating and evaluating resources. On a more abstract level, writing alongside students demonstrates the instructor’s willingness to work and learn with students in the course. It gives the instructor insight into what is required of the students. The instructor gains a better sense of the assignment’s difficulty and the amount of time that might be required to complete it, as well as an understanding of how to measure the success of each student’s final draft. Perhaps most importantly, the very process of planning, drafting, and revising is made more visible in the classroom as the instructor walks and talks with the students through some of the specific choices the instructor has made, leading to improved communication of writing processes, discipline-specific standards and conventions, and the students’ overall possibilities and constraints. The drafts resulting from the various stages of writing—while far from perfect—are useful for the completion of the students’ own responses to each assignment.
The practice of writing alongside students seems adaptable to nearly any discipline in which writing is required. In a Creative Writing course I shared various poems, often messy handwritten and printed drafts, that I was finishing as the students were beginning to work on their own. Additionally, for a 20th-Century Critical Theory course, I shared a piece, written after I had attended a Martin Luther King memorial, modeled on the essays in Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*. Finally, in a History of the English Language course, I shared a set of drafts for my paper on the history of the word “coffee” in the English language. Experts in helping professions could similarly model how to write a personal philosophy of counseling or how to complete the multiple stages of producing case notes, beginning perhaps with a video of an intake interview with a client, moving through a discussion of how to take notes and complete forms while facing a client, and ending in a one- to two-paragraph document distilling the results of the intake interview in a manner conventional to that particular discipline.

This approach, of course, is not without its pitfalls. For one, writing alongside students requires a lot of extra work on the part of instructors, at times making such an activity only possible or desirable no more than once a semester. If instructors keep good notes and all of the drafts of a particular project, the work could be presented in similar courses over the next two or three semesters. Should instructors reuse old drafts year after year, however, they would miss the point of writing alongside the students in the course. The longer the material goes unrevised, the less suited it becomes for making the writing process visible to those in the classroom.

A second pitfall is that some students will inevitably follow the instructor’s early drafts a little too closely. Students in my Fall 2009 professional writing course had extended access to my drafts through our electronic course page, and many of the students clearly used my work as their only model: dividing their selected process into three phases (regardless of whether or not that division made sense for their individual topics), using boldface in ways similar or identical to my own, and writing introductions that were very similar to, but less developed than, the one in my first draft. In such cases, imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery, and as instructors we must resist the desire to have students mimic our work. One technique to avoid slavish imitation would be to delay giving students ongoing access to the instructor-generated documents as they plan and draft their own. Instructors can still present their own work to students at each stage of the process, using electronic format and allowing some time for students to take notes and ask questions, but then postpone further access to the instructors’ work. In the Spring 2010 semester, I continued to present my own work directly to students once at each stage, but no longer allowed unlimited access. It is a simple matter to save my work to the electronic course page and keep the documents hidden from students until they have made substantial progress on their own drafts.

In discussing the benefits and challenges of writing alongside the student, whatever the discipline, this article may seem to some readers to be stating the obvious, but few teachers seem to employ this practice in the classroom or even to discuss it at conferences or in publications (Kiefer 2003). After well over a decade of talk about interdisciplinarity and about writing in disciplines or across the curriculum, writing at the university level continues to be viewed by many instructors as divided between form and content, with form being assigned to the English department or Writing Center and content belonging to the subject-area experts in other disciplines. In the handout “Using Writing in Disciplinary, Subject-Matter Courses,” for example, Peter Elbow (2001) makes the comment:

> In short, if you insist on strong writing on serious essays, students will usually provide it if that’s the only way they can get a good grade—and if you give them lots of practice writings to warm up. This doesn’t mean you have to teach writing. (Do you have to teach typing to insist on typed papers?) There is no greater service you can provide to us writing teachers or to a Writing Center than to make students angry by demanding good writing yet not stopping to teach it. (p. 4)
Writing Center staff members are likely to provide feedback on the form of student writing only, such as grammar and word choice, and even then, they may not always give good advice, as they may not be familiar with important, discipline-specific conventions outside of their areas of expertise. Weaker writers tend to prefer such comments about form over the more abstract comments about content in their writing (Zacharias 2007) and thus seem all the more unlikely to develop discipline-specific writing practices without explicit instruction by subject-matter experts. Ideally, as seen in the detailed studies of Hutto (2003) and Stoller (2005), interdisciplinary committees of experts in the areas of writing and other disciplines, such as Chemistry and Biology, can work together to help better define and thereby teach the writing conventions in a particular discipline. On a more modest scale, individual instructors—without stopping to do anything extraneous to the subject being taught—can complete the occasional project alongside the students in a course. In so doing, instructors have the opportunity both to model discipline-specific writing practices and to reflect on their own assignments, grading standards, and writing strategies.

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Works Cited


