Engaging Students, Deepening Learning: Lessons from Professor Hannah Eldridge

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Writing assignments engage students and deepen their learning, finds the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) recent survey of over 20,000 undergraduate students. But not just any writing assignments. Engaging writing assignments—those that increase students' interest, time spent, and learning—must include interactive components, immerse students in meaning-making activities, and feature clear expectations.

In Literature in Translation 236: Extreme Stories: Tales of Criminality and Disease, UW-Madison German professor Hannah Eldridge brings those requirements to life. In addition to introducing students to fictional, legal, psychological, and medical cases charting the extremes of human experience, Eldridge carefully designs and sequences writing assignments.

Fulfilling a Communication-B requirement, 236 includes explicit instruction and extended support for writing, speaking, and information literacy. While that support is enabled by its small size—it's capped at 20 students—Eldridge offers advice transferable across disciplines and course size.

In particular, she offers three vital lessons for designing assignments to engage students, deepen learning, and develop their writing in any course.

An Overview of the Writing Assignments

The course has four major assignments:

- Summary of a reading for a peer
- Diagnosis of a protagonist using Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
- Annotated Bibliography for final paper
- Final paper: letter to a politician making a policy recommendation regarding a legal, medical, or psychological issue covered in class

Other kinds of writing instruction that Eldridge uses in the course:

- Weekly discussion posts
- Peer review of student writing
- Feedback from Writing Fellows (undergraduate writing tutors embedded in the course)
- Optional revision of major papers and reflection on revision

1) Audience is everything.

"My number one strategy for helping students succeed with writing assignments is to specify a specific audience for their papers," Eldridge says. Asserting that "you can't know if you're communicating effectively if you don't know whom you're writing for," Eldridge clearly defines an audience—apart from the professor—for many of her students' papers. In 236, she starts small: students write a 500-word summary of one of the course readings for a fellow student who has missed the week's reading, keeping in mind what terms or information this person needs to know.

Having that relatively familiar audience acclimates students to thinking about readers and what they need (or don't need) to know. In this way, students move beyond thinking of "good writing" as a concept "defined in the professor's head as something he or she wants, but hasn't explained," notes Eldridge. For the final project, students write for a more complex audience: they compose a letter to a politician making a policy recommendation regarding a legal, medical, or psychological issue addressed in class.

According to Eldridge, students "do an excellent job of identifying what would be compelling to these individuals. If they were writing to a socially conservative senator lobbying for HPV vaccines, they'd explain that this is not an issue of becoming sexually active, but a public health issue. If they were writing to another politician, they might use their research into that politician's activities to say something like, 'You've been involved with the Violence Against Women Act. Let me tell you how I think we should change our response to violence against women.'"

In the end, students "came up with very, very compelling solutions supported by evidence, and were also very aware of the real-world constraints that these politicians are under," Eldridge reports. "I don't think I had a single paper about which I thought, 'Oh come on, we can never actually do that.' They were all very aware of their audience, and that was what I had been going for."

2) Give them the rubric.

Considering audience and grappling with complicated issues and arguments pushes students toward more complex thinking. But Eldridge acknowledges that "giving students something completely different and unexpected" increases the burden on instructors to make their expectations as clear as possible to students.

"My assignment sheets and instructions are extremely specific," Eldridge says. "I explain the details of projects and offer time for questions about the instructions. But I sometimes hear from students, 'I didn't know what you expected.' And I think that happens precisely because past writing experiences have conditioned students to expect to write a standard five-paragraph essay: give some kind of a thesis, have some interchangeable example paragraphs, and repeat the thesis."

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Eldridge works against that expectation by being clear and specific about assignment and evaluation guidelines. She recommends developing and providing rubrics—or clear evaluation criteria for students and faculty to get on the same page. "Give them the rubric"—early on, Eldridge suggests, ideally as soon as you assign a project.

Then students use that rubric themselves to grade sample papers from previous classes. As a group, they discuss how they came to those evaluations. "I think that practice does diminish the feeling of arbitrariness in grading because they come up with surprisingly consistent evaluations of a given piece of work," she says.

3) *Einmal ist keinmal.*

"Repetition is how we learn," says Eldridge, "and there's a German proverb '*Einmal ist keinmal'* or 'once is never.' Unless we stop, reflect, and create coherence, students will feel like they're buried by the coursework and come out the other end without reflecting on what they've learned." For Eldridge, repetition, revision, and reflection are vital teaching and learning tools.

For every paper, she gives students the opportunity to revise once for the chance to regain up to half of the points they lost. "I decided to do that because to me it was more important that they get the opportunity to improve than that I have a pretty grade distribution, especially because we don't do any exact assignment twice. So having the repetition via revision struck me as really, really important," Eldridge explains. "I think students appreciate it mostly for grade purposes, but I think they get much more out of it than that."

Students gain much from the reflection that Eldridge requires with revision: they must submit a letter explaining the revisions they chose to make based on feedback given by Eldridge and peers. Reflection is key to students' learning, says Eldridge: "I've found that it's not really enough simply to ask students to change their writing or thinking, or to do things differently; you need to encourage students to say for themselves, 'Okay this is what I would do differently—and this is why.'"

Teaching students to articulate their thinking and learning is crucial for students and liberal arts departments: "I think that both for the benefit of students going out into the work world and for our own good, we need to teach students to be aware of exactly what skills they are gaining," Eldridge reflects. When we fail to do so, "we cause students to sell themselves short. They have no account of what they can do as a result of a liberal arts degree, and we're selling ourselves short. Teaching students to recognize how what they and we do matters can also be a reminder to us of why we got into the profession of teaching in the first place." ●

Writing Fellows at UW-Madison

To learn more about Writing Fellows or to apply to work with a Fellow in a course you are teaching in Spring 2015, please contact us.

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Writing Fellows are talented, carefully selected, and extensively trained undergraduates who serve as peer writing tutors in classes across the College of Letters & Science. The Fellows make thoughtful comments on drafts of assigned papers and hold conferences with students to help them make smart, significant revisions to their papers *before* the papers are turned in for a grade. Building on the special trust that peers can share, Fellows help students not only to write better papers but also to take themselves more seriously as writers and thinkers.

Fellows are equipped to tutor writing across the L&S curriculum. In the past, they have worked with students in astronomy, Afro-American studies, history, philosophy, political science, chemistry, classics, English, women's studies, sociology, zoology, mathematics, psychology, geography, and more.

Professor Katherine Cramer, who has worked with Writing Fellows multiple times in her political science courses, says:

"The Writing Fellows are outstanding in their ability to motivate students to adhere to the assignment. In particular, they make sure the students state and develop arguments in their papers and push them to address the readings and important themes from the course."

You are eligible to apply to work with a Writing Fellow if you:

- are a faculty or academic staff member teaching a course with at least two writing assignments, with between 12 and 40 students enrolled in the course
- are willing to adjust your syllabus to allow time for revision and to require that all enrolled students work with the assigned Fellow(s)
- are willing to meet regularly with the assigned Fellow(s) to discuss assignments

The number of Writing Fellows is limited, so the sooner you let us know of your interest, the better!