2. Experiences of a Frustrated Graduate Committee Member Turned Writing Instructor

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The primary method of writing instruction in most graduate programs is one-on-one interaction between student and major advisor. My experiences suggested that this method leads to large differences in the styles taught and in effectiveness. Frustrated students and faculty (especially advisors and committee members) result because of this approach.

I wanted to do something to help our graduate students but I didn't want my not being a writing instructor to get in the way of their learning advanced writing techniques. I decided to develop and teach a one-credit course, Writing in Horticulture, during the fall semester of 1994. To justify my efforts in this area I decided to approach the task as a one-semester experiment on teaching graduate students about writing, but not how to write. This eased some of my insecurities about teaching in this subject area.

After reviewing the literature on previous courses of this nature, I decided to base "Writing in Horticulture" on two previously published course formats designed for post-baccalaureate students. One course was for graduate students at Emory University (Scholarly Publishing 11:256-266), and the other for research scientists at the Rand Corporation (Scholarly Publishing 11:61-71). I concluded that the present course had to be interactive and hands-on, with students using their own writings whenever possible.

Results from a questionnaire assisted in developing appropriate methods of instruction for the course. The questionnaire determined student writing habits, prior experiences, and thoughts on writing. The thirteen enrolled students received the questionnaire at the first class meeting. This sample size represents over 80% of the graduate students in the Department of Horticulture.

Of the 13 individuals in the class, six were seeking M.S. degrees, six were seeking Ph.D. degrees, and one was a postdoctoral student. Most of these individuals (eight) considered themselves to be average in writing skills while four considered themselves to be below average. Only one student considered their skill to be above average. Eight had no prior formal writing courses and seven indicated no informal training. Business writing was the most frequently mentioned formal training of the students.

The hardest part of writing for the students was "getting started." The students felt that the most important reason for writing in society was for "sharing ideas" and "communication." They also believe that "publish or perish" still exists at the University and that quantity of publications was more important than quality.

Since the results of the questionnaire indicated that many of the students had little to no formal training in writing, I developed and distributed a one-to-two page handout to the students each week summarizing what week's discussions and activities. The students placed all handouts and supporting information into a three-ring binder notebook for easy future reference. The weekly handout had the following section headings: Written Assignment, Reading Assignment, This Week's Discussion Topic and Reference Materials, Discussion Outline, and Next Week's Discussion Topic.

The first written assignment was to develop a three to five-page manuscript designed for the popular press. A managing editor chosen from the class logged and tracked manuscript submissions and returns. Two students reviewed each submitted manuscript and returned them to the managing editor. The editor (the class instructor) returned the manuscript and reviews to the authors. The authors made the appropriate revisions and the revised manuscript was resubmitted for a grade.

The second written assignment was a three- to five-page grant proposal. I was the sole reviewer for this assignment and no revisions were necessary. The third assignment was to develop an abstract for a previously published manuscript in a horticulture journal.

Each week there were also reading assignments. Topics included writing avoidance, writing for publication, criteria for publication, handling rejection, and assignment of publication credit. Additional readings discussed the psychology of successful scientific writers such as early career determinants of research productivity and patterns of productivity of Nobel laureates.

In-class discussions covered the mechanics of writing, common mistakes in writing, principles of reviewing, grant proposal writing, types of professional correspondence, and other types of writing. The final discussion covered speed-reading techniques.

In conclusion, all students (and the instructor) completed the course. While my students may not be better writers than they would have been otherwise, I know they are now more conscious of how and why they write. I feel my experiment was a success.

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2. Nurses as Writers: A New Use of Writing in the Health Professions

Jeanne M. Sorrell, DAEd, RN, Associate Professor, Nursing

In today's increasingly complex health care environment, it is critical that nurses not only be able to write competently "on the job," but that they understand the power which they have as nurse writers to shape the health care of tomorrow. I developed a new course, Nurses as Writers, to address this need in our curriculum for both undergraduate and graduate nursing students.

Background

George Mason has an active Writing Across the Curriculum program, in which all graduates from the University are required to take at least one writing-intensive course in their major. My doctoral studies in composition, as well as my activities as a Teacher/Consultant for the Northern Virginia Writing Project, motivated me to implement a course that would offer students in the health professions additional practice in writing. The course is designed to enhance writing skills, as well as help students see the potential power of writing in their discipline.

Course of the Course

Students complete four short writing assignments, regular journal entries, an oral critique of a book authored by a nurse, and a collaborative writing project. Working in peer response groups and individually, students revise each paper before receiving a final grade. Short papers provide practice in writing for professional and lay audiences in different styles, such as an abstract or executive summary, a persuasive essay, a critique of a professional article, and a short personal writing. Each class member is also asked to keep a journal throughout the semester, writing for at least 15 minutes each day. Although I do not collect the journals to read, students rate this activity very highly, commenting that they enjoy "permission" to be creative. Students present oral critiques of books written by nurses. I learned that identifying these authors was difficult, for our library had no way of accessing this information. Queries on the Internet brought no answers, but frequent requests for the list once it was available! My class has identified a list of about 30 nurse authors, which I plan to communicate on Internet. Students place themselves in groups to complete a collaborative writing project over the course of the semester. Their projects have been both useful and innovative, including a children's book on nutrition, a desk calendar enhanced with class members' poetry, an exercise program for senior citizens, and an orientation coloring book for patients at the Children's Hospital in Washington DC. Faculty presentations are supplemented by talks from expert nurse writers. A nurse ethicist spoke to the class about ethical aspects of writing, and a nurse editor provided advice on writing for publication. A high school counselor offered advice in writing recommendations. I also write letters to students during the semester, and ask them to write back to me about their progress. Students are very enthusiastic about receiving these "individual letters," and I gain valuable information about their perceptions of their progress.

Evaluation of the Course

For the two times this course has been offered, student evaluations have been very positive. Nursing faculty have commented that they can see substantial improvement in the writing skills of students who have taken the course. Perhaps most important, many students state that they gained a new, more confident sense of themselves as nurse writers.

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Nurses as Writers: Class Outline

Session 1 Introduction to course/Writing class notes/ How organizational culture influences writing
Session 2 Research in composition/The writing process: Prewriting, writing, rewriting/Madman, architect, carpenter, judge
Session 3 Summarizing critical information for patients, families, and peers
Session 4 Evaluating a thesis/Sins of scientific writing/Writing with style
Session 5 Writing for self-expression/Critiquing writing of self and peers
Session 6 Persuading an audience/Writing a resume or curriculum vitae
Session 7 On-the-job writing: Instructions, objectives, job descriptions, Document design
Session 8 On-the-job writing: Memos, letters, agendas, minutes
Session 9 Responsible authorship: Ethical/legal aspects of writing
Session 10 On-the-job writing: Reports and evaluations
Session 11 Critiquing scientific writing/American Psychological Association (APA) format/The editing process
Session 12 The power of a nurse writer in shaping the profession/Writing as a nursing career
Session 13 Grant writing
Session 14 Writing to communicate in the nursing profession
Session 15 "Read around": Students and faculty read aloud one of their writings