

Professor Robyn Spencer in her portfolio documented the impact of redesigning HIS 250, African-American Heritage, a survey of the history of people of African descent, to incorporate Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) techniques and methodologies in Spring 2009. Professor Spencer, with her writing fellow Madeline Perez, focused on scaffolding a research paper assignment.

QUESTION

Due to poor student performance on a research paper I [Prof. Spencer] looked to revise the assignment. I created smaller writing assignments leading students to do the work and acquire the skills necessary to more successfully write the research paper. In my portfolio I evaluated the effectiveness of this scaffolding in helping students to write a thesis driven paper that reflected an understanding of historiography and utilized primary and secondary sources to build and support an argument.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

I asked students to complete a series of smaller assignments which lead up to the final paper which was worth 40% of the class grade. I also broke the term paper down into seven parts and created several low stakes assignments spread across 6.5 weeks to support students in completing the assignment. I asked students to:

1. attend an initial conference with me to choose a topic,
2. submit a thesis statement paragraph and annotated bibliography,
3. analyze primary source documents connected to their paper,
4. participate in group discussion and take a quiz on research and plagiarism,
5. draft a historiographic section (a literature review on their topic), and
6. meet with me to discuss and workshop a draft of the paper.

The last step of course was to hand in a final draft of the paper.

METHOD FOR ADDRESSING THE QUESTION

To determine the effectiveness of the smaller component assignments, I looked at the work of two students in detail, one who was more prepared and capable to deal with the course material and another who was not. Moreover I evaluated the effectiveness of scaffolding the research paper by examining the completion rate and quality of student work for each portion of the assignment, the quality of the final papers, and answers to an anonymous student survey on the last day of class.

FINDINGS

1. Student Conferences

- Although there were drawbacks such as the large time investment and missed appointments, I found the student meetings to define a topic to be a successful step with 87.5% of students attending the conference.
- This impression was validated by the results of the student survey (hereafter referred to as Final Survey) on which students had positive reports about the impact of the student-faculty conference. They said that it “really helped. I was able to locate and use many of the sources she [Prof. Spencer] gave me”, it “helped a lot by giving us a point from where to spring from” and “got me to focus on a topic and put me on the path to getting information.”

2. Thesis statement paragraph and annotated bibliography

- The second part of the assignment – the thesis paragraph had mixed results.
- Despite timing this assignment to coincide with Spring Break, requiring students to consult a guidebook for writing history, and providing a worksheet, this proved to be a challenging step.
- Only 56.25% of the students completed it.
- Many students wrote introductory paragraphs rather than thesis paragraphs, a fair number of them submitted regular bibliographies rather than annotated ones, and most had consulted fewer sources than was required.

2a. Class session on the Paper

In response to the problems I encountered in the previous exercise I decided to insert a step in the paper scaffolding process – I dedicated an entire class session to various issues of concern. I asked a former student to come in to address questions about the paper in the hopes that students would relate to a successful peer. I also asked a writing tutor from the ACE to come in and present information on the services that they provide. In addition I shared several successful thesis paragraphs anonymously from the class, actively discussing what these paragraphs had in common structurally and why they were successful. Finally, I distributed a worksheet that students completed in class helping students to develop and articulate their thesis statements.

- Devoting the class session to work shopping the paper was incredibly helpful to students.
- In the Final Survey students were overwhelmingly positive about that class, with 90.9% of students indicating that the class session clarified expectations.
- When the final papers were submitted 92% of the class submitted papers that revolved around a thesis.
- It is clear that by the end students demonstrated that they could create a thesis statement and use it to organize their paper. However, in the Final Survey a large minority, 36.3%, incorrectly identified a thesis as a summary or an introduction.
- This discrepancy between execution and definition suggests that more work should be done to get students to clearly differentiate a thesis statement from a summary.

3. Primary Source Analysis

- The third part of the assignment required the students to submit two primary source documents. The goal was for them to learn how to identify what a primary source was, acquire two that pertained to their topic, and begin the process of analyzing them.
- This step had the lowest completion rate with only 43.8% of students turning in primary sources, even though I made sure to identify at least one primary source during the student-faculty conference and subsequently provided a student sample illustrating how to incorporate primary sources.
- Unsurprisingly, only 53.8% of the final papers demonstrated the appropriate use of scholarly sources.

4. Plagiarism quiz

- I gave students a True/False Plagiarism quiz which they completed in class and discussed in small groups. The goal was for students to apply their understanding of plagiarism to typical scenarios they would encounter while writing their paper.
- I felt that it was the most productive intervention around plagiarism, however, the papers told a different story.
- Very few students paraphrased, used direct quotes or made any attempt to credit another thinker for their ideas.
- Despite the fact that 90.9% of students correctly responded to the question “What is Plagiarism?” on the Final Survey, only 23% of the final papers reflected the correct usage of citations.
- Despite the failure of students to cite, I was encouraged to note that there were zero cases of grossly deceptive plagiarism—cutting and pasting, purchasing paper from a paper mill, etc.

5. Historiographic Paragraph

- The fifth segment of the assignment required students to devise a historiographical paragraph for their paper. The assignment embodied what I was trying to do with the class, requiring students to conceptualize themselves as experts and envision themselves in dialogue with other experts.
- Once again, disengagement was an index of difficulty as only 56.25% of the students submitted a historiographical paragraph and only 30.7% of them included any sense of historiography in their final papers.
- The Final Survey confirms this as only 5 of 11 students correctly defined historiography, while 2 defined it incorrectly and 4 left the answer blank.
- Despite these mixed results, this was a promising outcome: learning historiography and feeling comfortable inserting oneself in the literature, especially without a breadth of knowledge under ones belt, is a skill that graduate level students struggle with. By practicing historiography in my class I hope I laid the foundation for the future.

6. Final Paper Conference

- Part six required students to have a conference with me a few days before the due date to read over a draft of their paper of at least five pages in length in order to catch any major problems before the final paper was due.
- Unfortunately, this step met with a lot of student resistance. Unlike the first conference where I made appointments, I cleared two days on my schedule and held an Open House.
- Only 43.8% of students took advantage of this opportunity to workshop their drafts.

CONCLUSIONS

I believe that revising this course to adopt WAC techniques helped many students gain a larger historical vocabulary and familiarized them with disciplinary ways of knowing and habits of mind, however fewer students were able to translate their new knowledge into new practices as they wrote up their papers. Many students defaulted to ingrained habits and problematic patterns; or disengaged from the process altogether, especially as the end of the semester

stressors grew in intensity. Comparing the Final Survey--which is a sign of comprehension--and the actual term paper-- a more accurate reflection of internalization and execution--is telling.

NEXT STEPS

As I look ahead, I will consider how to bridge the gap between comprehension and execution. I will try to incorporate more opportunities for students to practice new skills by more directly linking the skills expected on the paper to the early low stakes assignments. I will consider ways to shift responsibility onto the students' shoulders through peer review and work at home projects. In order to ensure compliance, I will better incentivize the completion of the steps and perhaps have fewer of them. Additionally, by the end of the semester it was clear that students were not relying on *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History* by Rampolla. A simple take home quiz on the book, coupled with peer graded answers, might help ensure that students take the book more seriously and gain from the resources it offers.