

Answering the Unvoiced Demand for Help: Tutors as Necessary Links in the Academic Chain

by Sean Williamson
Student Tutor

If there is one thing I've learned as a college tutor, it is that a percentage of the student body has a very real need to have access to academic support outside the classroom.

Having tutored writing for two different programs at SVSU (the English 080/111 pilot program, directed by Dr. Sally Cannon and the Academic Achievement Center headed by Kim McDonald), I've found it very rewarding to help fellow students help themselves as they work to meet the rigors of college demands.

Overall, I feel SVSU provides excellent opportunities for students to receive extra help away from the classroom, and I enjoy being a part of this educational process. However, I feel that society has created a stigma associated with the act of asking for help, and for this reason, many students who could benefit from tutoring services are not willing to seek the help.

Today's social mores encourage continuing education but they also stress independence. For some students, these conflicting values can cause problems. It is easy enough for an instructor to direct students to a center, where they can receive extra academic help, but the reality is that many (students) feel that if they cannot do it on their own then they should not be in college. No one is to blame for the conflicting

messages students receive. Our culture, as a whole, sends them. It is up to everyone to begin changing these counteractive societal conventions so that asking for help becomes less equated with incompetency and more equated with taking the initiative to help yourself.

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As a tutor, I am in a position to help change students' perceptions of their abilities and make them feel comfortable asking for help. I have tutored all types of students, each with different needs. Some of my tutees know English only as a second language, others have physical or learning disabilities, and still others simply wish to confirm that their writing is written "correctly." It doesn't matter what reasons an individual has for seeking tutoring; what matters is that he or she takes the initiative to receive help.

By making students feel comfortable with tutoring and making the process as painless as possible, I try to encourage a loss of inhibitions in my tutees. Once they do, my job, as well as the students' job, becomes

much easier. We are able to get to the tasks-at-hand without any reservations holding us back.

College instructors and the adjunct academic body, including tutors, can do a lot in erasing the stigma associated with "asking for help." However, I feel this must extend beyond the confines of the academic institution, to the larger sections of society. By working together, I feel this goal is within reach and that someday everyone will be able to achieve their full potential without feeling threatened if they have to ask for a little help along the way.

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SEAN WILLIAMSON

There Is a Back Row: First Year as an Adjunct

DENA HAYDEN

Designing Effective Writing Assignments

DIANE BOEHM

There Is a Back Row: First Year as an Adjunct

by Dena Hayden
Adjunct Instructor of English

Tom Meehan and I were recently discussing our first year as adjunct English faculty after completing our M.A.'s in English at CMU. We had both been nontraditional students at SVSU, and now we are back, facing a big time reality check. The transition from SVSU student to SVSU instructor has not been easy, but it has been interesting, to say the least.

While we studied the theories of teaching composition and practiced them under the watchful eyes of our mentors at CMU, we were not prepared for one area of being an instructor that requires time, energy, and skill. Tom and I agree that the biggest surprise we encountered is the necessity of being a listener not just to problems dealing with writing or English or even other classes, but the need to be a listener to problems dealing with life.

As we moved from the front-row seats we had occupied as students to our place behind the podium as instructors, we were forced to realize that we knew nothing about the *Back Row*.

The Back Row and Back Row Wannabes were our welcome committee to the real world of teaching composition. The note passing, newspaper reading, conversing, sleeping, and/or walking-in-late-to-the-cheers-of-Back-Row-members were events that might have occurred when we were students, but we were not a part of that community.

Reality set in quickly in September when the Back Row, Back Row Wannabes, and the Front Row all faced us waiting, waiting, *waiting!* It was our classroom and what happened or did not happen was, if not our responsibility, at least our concern. We had to recognize the Back Row, as well as the other

students in the room, as a part of our classroom environment. The first step seemed to be to get to know these people and for them to get to know us and each other. We wanted a community of writers.

As the semester unfolded, we found the Back Row to be a fun place, and at times we could even be found sitting there. We thought about what had kept us focused as students, and we strove to use those same techniques with our students. Drew Hinderer has remarked that some students felt PE credit should be given for taking his courses

The Back Row and Back Row Wannabes were our welcome committee to the "real world" of teaching composition.

because students had to constantly move in their seats to keep up with him as he moved around the room lecturing. Neither Tom nor I stand behind the podium very much, and we may fast equal Hinderer in PE credits given. If students are talking, reading, sleeping, or arriving late, they are not focused on the class, and we need to find a way to connect with them.

Of course we realize that there will be days—and students—that will exhaust every technique we or any veteran instructor could possibly apply. With those situations we found the same instructors we once sat in front of are now good sounding boards; they help us accept that not every student is going to stay focused every minute of every class, even those in the front row. And not every student in the Back Row is going to succeed. This information is very hard to accept, however, and we

still question what else we might do to help them.

When success does not happen, we have found that the reason is often that a student's life outside of the class interferes. In order to be effective instructors, we have to find ways to help our students learn how to separate their life in school from their life outside school. We are learning where to direct our students for help in solving individual problems, whether it be a need for help with financial aid, scheduling conflicts, tutoring, etc. When a student comes to talk with us about the problems of life, we need to be empathetic, direct them to the person who can help in the situation, and then turn the focus back to the course and the student's work in that course.

While it is not always easy to separate life from the classroom, we know it has to be done if the ultimate goal of the University is to be accomplished: Intellectual and Personal Growth. We may not be qualified to deal with many issues affecting personal growth, but others at the University are. We are, however, qualified to provide an environment where intellectual growth can occur, and that is where the focus of our time and energy must be.

So, in our first year as adjuncts, we have learned a great deal, and we owe much of that to the Back Row. Being a student is not always easy: life happens and often gets in the way of what happens in the classroom. While students in the Back Row may not have the same educational goals we had as students, their goals for higher education are just as valid as ours were. And it is our responsibility to offer the opportunity for our course to be a step toward meeting those goals. Sitting in the Back Row offers a different perspective, as we've discovered, but different isn't always bad.

Designing Effective Writing Assignments

by Diane Boehm
Writing Program Director

California State mathematics professor Steve BeMiller asserts, "Writing is thinking made visible."

If that is true—and all my experience with the teaching of writing suggests it is—then the task of designing effective writing assignments requires more than "write a 10-page term paper on how TV advertising influences consumers." An effective writing assignment develops as we identify the kind of thinking we want our students to do, and then create parameters within the assignment that will generate that kind of thinking.

In their concise and helpful book, *Improving Student Writing*, Moss, Andrew and Holder offer three suggestions for developing effective writing assignments:

1. derive the writing assignment from the objectives of the course;
2. prepare printed guidelines for students which
 - a. specify the task or purpose of the assignment
 - b. outline the discrete steps to be taken to complete the assignment
 - c. clarify the audience for the document
 - d. explain the evaluation criteria;
3. give students a chance to help each other.

Students Say . . .

To "test" these suggestions, I consulted some experienced writing-assignment-executors, my English 300 Advanced Composition students. I asked them to analyze the characteristics of effective writing assignments, based on their experiences as college students. Here are their Top Eight suggestions:

1. Guide students to find writing topics which are personally relevant

to them, topics either of personal interest or related to their field of study. This enhances student motivation and performance, since, as Kris reminds us, students rarely write well when they are not interested in the topic. Matt puts it this way: "Once attention is gone, the learning process is over."

2. Use several shorter assignments rather than just one long paper, so that students can apply what they learned in early assignments to the more challenging later assignments. This would also allow for a greater variety of writing assignments. Allow sufficient time for each assignment so students can do good work, Amanda C. requests. Students need time to "ponder [their] thoughts," Annette maintains.
3. Provide "explicit" written guidelines for the assignment, suggests Scott. Verbal instructions are easily misunderstood or forgotten.
4. Explain the evaluation criteria. "Knowing what I will be graded on helps when I write the paper," states Jennifer. Explaining these after the paper is graded and returned is "too late."
5. When returning graded papers, provide comments with the grade,

so the students will know how their work met or did not meet the evaluation criteria, requests Amanda B. Such comments can be a valuable teaching strategy.

6. Provide opportunities for feedback on drafts, while the student is still in the process of revising the paper. In Amy's experience, "Feedback...can make the difference between an average paper and an excellent one." If it isn't possible for the instructor to provide feedback, refer the student to someone who can. (The Writing Center would be one option.)
7. Present examples of the kinds of papers students are to write; "this gives you an idea of how the paper should be set up when it is completed," agreed Ryan, Sarah, Lynnette and Mike.
8. Set up and monitor peer groups; these can be very helpful, both for feedback and to provide a variety of perspectives on a topic or assignment.

Ryan, Sarah, Lynnette and Mike summarize what I believe goes to the heart of designing effective writing assignments: "It is good to have a teacher who works with you and your ideas to develop a productive paper, [rather than] against you."



Writing Program Director Diane Boehm (right) offers tips for more effective writing to Annette Weidman, a sophomore business major from Pigeon.

Reminders

Reserve August 25 for the faculty writing and learning workshop led by Dr. Patricia Lambert Stock of Michigan State University.

Writing Program Director Diane Boehm invites faculty to stop by her office, 202 Wickes Hall, for ideas and materials for the use of writing in each discipline. Faculty also can contact Boehm at ext. 7728 to arrange a personal consultation and/or for conversation.

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