

**Revise and Resubmit:
incorporating our professional practices into undergraduate writing instruction**

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Delivered at the American Political Science Association's Teaching and Learning
Conference, February 9th 2007
Charlotte, North Carolina

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Introduction

We as political scientists have developed some rather good practices for producing and improving writing in our discipline. We have learned how to best utilize all available resources present within the university and academy to assist the production of solid scholarship. Under the shelter of facilitating institutions, we now have access to an array of amazingly capable communications tools. This infrastructure instantly connects us to past scholarship, peer groups, and the entire social science community. This rapid rise in technological infrastructure has facilitated an increase in networking capabilities. Disciplines, like political science, already possessing strong community cultures, are reaping immediate rewards. A second cache of capital combines with this interconnectedness to exponentially increase our potential as scholars. That resource is the inexhaustible ethic of peer review. We are unafraid to lean on our peers when we craft articles; time-consuming comments are consistently available for each and every iteration of a project. This practice allows a scholar to receive incremental feedback on their work. Perhaps more important than any environmental condition, however, is the luxurious grant of time. Entrusted to researchers in the development, execution, and dissemination of scholarship, time represents a grant of intellectual freedom. As any professor will admit, however, this grant of time comes with a number of practices that keep its use in check. Departments have an uncanny way of signaling to the scholar what they think of their developmental path. Periodical reviews introduce a reality check to the liberality of inquiry.

However, these environmental conditions and evolved practices of researchers rarely factor into our consciousness as direct influences on our writing. It is therefore

unsurprising that we seldom consider them in pedagogical discussions about undergraduate education. This is a mistake. This article summarizes three helpful shifts in pedagogy that will foster a better learning environment for the instruction and practice of undergraduate expository writing. They are: 1) *creating an extended classroom community via a web-based commons*, 2) *cultivating a review culture via symbiotic peer development*, and 3) *replacing traditional evaluation methods with incremental assessment and holistic portfolio evaluation*. Although treated in turn, each of the following components are part of an interactive whole.

Creating A Virtual Commons

Technological Advantage in Scholarship:

We exist as scholars in a community linked by a technological infrastructure. While it is true that our primary affiliations are to the institution signing our checks, we are also associated with a larger community of political scientists. Therefore, while we share a material and physical space with the colleagues down the corridor, we also maintain frequent contact with associates and collaborators around the globe. Our integrative reality is a significant achievement for political science and helps to advance the discipline as a field of inquiry. This interconnectedness is clearly assisted by an explosion of easy to use communication tools. It is becoming fairly manageable to solicit help and advice from far away friends at any hour of the day. Email clearly allows us to communicate around the clock, however, the web also facilitates other activity such as submitting your abstract, reviewing a colleague's journal article, or posting your updated curriculum vitae to a webpage. None of this is confined to normal business hours. We

are becoming remarkably adept at using technology professionally; yet, there is a considerable lag in applying it to undergraduate instruction. The opportunity is ours to seize upon our familiarity with these practices and incorporate these everyday skills and incorporate them into our undergraduate courses.

Available Tools for Undergraduate Instruction:

Today, many professors maintain online web pages that contain course information, assignments, and documents. Additionally, more advanced pages include online course reserves, past examinations, and news or journal article links. These are fantastic one-way tools for allowing students instantaneous and remote access to course information. Why stop there? We can significantly increase the usefulness of these sites by facilitating multidirectional communication. This requires that we relax a somewhat comfortable assumption about information exchange by adopting a new perspective: not all information exchange requires direct participation with a professor. While preserving the instructor-student dyadic relationship, we can augment our roles to facilitate information exchange amongst our students. We can expand our role as writing instructor to that of facilitating a community-building dynamism in the classroom. To do this, we need only the consciousness of our own practices and a space to meet. Our courses already provide a common area a few times a week in class meetings; the web allows us to augment this facility with the addition of a *virtual commons*.

Many institutions of higher learning now maintain access to learning management systems (LMS) such as Blackboard. Blackboard is a relatively pain-free, dummy-proof platform of interactive tools. Features include chat rooms (facilitating online office hours

or group discussions), digital drop-boxes (allowing students to submit completed assignments or peer reviews), space for audiovisual presentations (providing access to instructor multimedia presentations), and course specific email tools (affording flexibility in mail management). Like a physical commons, this virtual space is available to the entire community continuously. These tools can allow an instructor to manage behind the scenes without “micromanaging” student interaction. It privileges instructors in setting the terms and bounds of its use, yet a virtual commons allows students to act freely within this secure environment. Although students will at first need some start-up cues, activity can quickly take on a life of its own.

A virtual commons allows us to overcome many material barriers to communication that exist outside of the classroom and opens up a new realm of transforming peers enrolled in a class into an interactive community. Of course, the infrastructure of an LMS is merely a technological tool and requires a good course design. However, a well-devised virtual commons has been shown to “increase student engagement and enhance critical thinking and deep understanding” (Percell, 2004: 61) in college classrooms. Thus, a carefully developed virtual commons created through an LMS provides an excellent platform for grafting a few professional writing practices onto our undergraduate writing instruction.

The community commons:

While peer review will receive a more direct treatment later in the piece, thinking about writing instruction as community oriented is a new perspective for students. The academy is partly responsible for this perspective, because political scientists assign

writing exercises that rarely suggest interaction with other writers. This focus overplays the overwhelmingly private aspects of development; it privileges solitude and discipline as the best avenues to success. Focusing on this private dynamic reinforces a limited perspective while ignoring that good writing also emanates from practice. Exposure to writing encourages the proliferation of ideas, styles, and perspectives. Research cultures develop through interaction and not from some inner spring. Writing instruction could truly benefit from expanding upon the classic instructor-student dyad, but opening up instruction to include other individuals engaged in the learning experience. Both within the actual space of a classroom commons and the virtual space of our online facility, students gain tremendously from interaction with their peers. Peer review may start in the classroom, but fostering tools that make it easy to collaborate with others is an important part of this process.

Learning management systems offer innumerable networking potentialities to foster the development of a community approach to writing instruction. LMS provides capability for meeting and communicating in between class meetings. It also allows students to form discuss project assignments and ask for peer advice on the writing process. While students maintain access to email, course web pages often provide even less official and informal means of soliciting assistance. Professors can also create online forum groups to discuss assignments and exercises. LMS also assist in the outside of the classroom group work. The instructor can organize students into smaller groups and give that group a virtual space to use during the assignment. It can augment the very real and irreplaceable benefits of interacting in the public sphere, by coordinating all that activity

necessary to complete a group assignment. LMS is most helpful as a platform of continued conversation of work begun in the classroom.

The Virtual Office:

Students ask questions a lot of good questions in office hours that many of us wish we could instantly relate to the group. Through LMS, instructors have the option of holding online discussion forums that benefit everyone's eyes. Making yourself available during hours when students are most likely to write, will win a lot of fans and assist instruction in the classroom. Online office hours, held in virtual chat rooms can up the level of output from your students. A wonderful side benefit of online office hours is the potential of anonymous student questions. Operating like the age-old suggestion box, students can ask their most insecure questions that may actually be shared by the entire group. If the instructor has thick skin and takes criticism well, this is a real opportunity to fine tune course designs and see what really works. Protected from retaliation, students are encouraged to offer their honest and unadulterated opinion of the course's operation.

Seminar Organization:

Writing seminars produce a very impressive paper trail. Students' drafts are accompanied by instructor comments and peer reviews. The amount of paper that accumulates makes it difficult for students to organize and even more susceptible to loss. Once you take into account books, course documents, assignment, and in-class exercises, students no longer need to invest in their gym memberships. LMS allows students to

access their portfolios online.¹ Although it is recommended that students keep a physical copy of their portfolio, LMS allows the professor to maintain a digital backup in case unruly dogs or the endless abyss swallows a student's record. Because the instructor eventually needs the entire portfolio to gauge a student's evolution, leaving the material increases the chances the student will keep it organized. As a backup, however, the professor is assured that a digitalized portfolio of student work is possible.

Flexibility in Course Design:

As instructors, we have a somewhat captive audience. How we structure a common space strongly influences its capability. Clarity, sincerity, and trustworthiness are essential in building an open community. Technological innovation is a freeing experience, yet over-structure and too much oversight can instill more fears of "big brother" than inspiring an image of a cutting edge instructor. Students who feel uncomfortable with the way in which you operate an online resource, are very unlikely to derive the benefits discussed above. The virtual commons, so much like our classrooms are only what we make of it.

It is worth noting that many undergraduates are somewhat predisposed to this type of online community. Undergraduates are a remarkably tech savvy group. In fact, they are more likely to push for high tech than the more senior demographic entrusted with their education. Students are also remarkably adept at accessing the commons that surround their lives. On the whole, they eat, exercise, study, and live in a relatively public environment. In many ways, student life contains more common space than that

¹ Note: In the truly technological advanced institutions, students also have the ability to access material from their desks in the classroom.

of the average professor. They are impressively generous with information and unselfishly educate each other across disciplines and areas of expertise. This is a valuable resource in any community building experience.

Peer Review

Cultivating a Culture of Peer Review.

Most writing instruction in political science operates within a closed instructor-student dynamic. In writing centered courses, students rely on instructor-driven personal attention. A majority of our time is looks at the art of the social science argument. We often tell student that they need to find their “voice” and spend a great deal of a semester assisting the student to hone this analytical prowess. It is more than clear that this part of the traditional dyadic relationship is indispensable to undergraduate education. It is also clear that it works for at least a subset of the student population. In fact, nearly every political scientist has directly benefited from this style of instruction. Yet, in this style of instruction, a mentor’s comments represent only one of a myriad of potential voices and only one form of potential stimuli. This dyadic method of developing scholarly work is the exact opposite of the way we as political science professionals write.

As academics, we exist within a research culture that encourages peer review and group collaboration. Social science professionals engage a research project with a full realization that it represents the start of a disciplined journey. Along the way, a project will engage friends, peers, and a field of scholars. As a community of professionals, we improve our writing through social practice. Attending conferences, presenting research,

participating in roundtables or colloquia, and by discussing a colleague's work are only a few examples.

Our writing intensive courses rarely engender this community approach to writing. This is somewhat curious because political scientists so often highlight the importance of a public sphere. Many courses assist students only in the private part of the writing process, leaving the community aspect decidedly unavailable. Learning through social practice exposes students to alternative mechanisms for discovering their own "voice." Because there is so much to learn through social interaction, it may be worth introducing students to this style of learning while still under an instructor's tutelage. Writing instructors share an exciting opportunity to craft a few techniques that expose students to some of the public dynamics of writing. The purpose is to inform students that much of what they admire in a finished piece of scholarship is the product of a process and that the process involves assistance from others. Pairing multi-draft assignments with a system of tiered peer review, introduces students to an open culture of cooperation, communication, and codependent scholarship. The following are a few suggested tools for building such practices into an undergraduate writing seminar.

Incorporating Peer-Review Into Undergraduate Instruction:

This operates in a similar fashion to professional peer review. Seminar-sized classes offer an ideal population of individuals to begin building a classroom community. Instructors first need to inform the students that peer review is a key component of the course and that their efforts will be a significant contributor to their performance in the course. Peer review is itself an exercise in analytical writing and

highly valued by the professor. Then, mirroring our professional experiences, introduce peer review in a number of stages; each with increasing scrutiny and professionalism. Here are a few suggestions of how this might operate. *Please note that this can operate independent of the virtual commons, incremental grading, and portfolio approach to grading; however, for the sake of continuity to the paper, it is assumed that the instructor would use all three.*

Stage 1: All authors are asked to sketch a first draft of an assignment. Analogous to having a close friend or colleague read the assignment, the students are encouraged to ask someone outside the course to look at their work. This first review is considered an unofficial look at the assignment and probably shouldn't require the submission of comments or considerations. You then ask the students to reflect upon their review. You could guide these reflections in a way that asks students to write up comments on the perceived quality of the review. You might also ask them to highlight what they perceive as a good approach to review. The comments they receive at this stage are less important than the actual introduction to peer review.

Stage 2: The second stage of review mirrors the practice of sending an article or manuscript to a respected colleague. After pairing students in the class, instructors could ask students to circulate to circulate their work to colleague in advance of an in-class meeting. It is a good idea to allow the student to choose their reviewer on this first assignment. We have choice at this stage of professional peer review and it is usually for good reason; students are unlikely to be any different. The reviewer should be asked to prepare written comments to bring to the in-class appointment. To stay consistent with the analogy of a friendly chat with a colleague, students should be allowed to chat

privately using the written comments as a springboard. The process, of course, is a reciprocal one. The team can then take 15 min or so to produce a plan for the next draft.

Note: For the purpose of community, you might consider imposing an artificial requirement that no two individuals work more than once on this stage.

Stage 3: Armed with this plan and the instructor's comments (discussed after stage 4), the student reengages the work to produce a second draft. Once finished, the review of the second draft should function somewhat like an article submission (midnight deadline and submission into an online digital drop). The instructor then digitally organizes completed assignments. For the purposes of anonymity the instructor then codes and redistributes the assignments for a second round of peer review. Guidelines for review should disseminate from the instructor with suggestions for how comments should proceed. All reviewers then have the opportunity to offer advice for a third draft with instructions to revise and resubmit.

Stage 4: the student should then meet with the instructor to talk about progress and concerns with the assignment. This discussion should speak to the project and the review process as a tool of evaluation. The student then completes the assignment and adds it to their portfolio (both physical and digital). At this point the instructor reviews each student's assignment file. The final thoughts and reflections on this piece should also include suggestions for further development and improvement. Finished pieces, (with the permission of the author) are then posted to the course webpage for community access.

The Importance of Concurrent Instructor Review:

In our discipline, peer review is ubiquitous and the promise it offers to writing is immense. That said, a first step to building a similar dynamic in our classrooms requires a promise to the students: we cannot abandon their development by replacing instructor review with peer review. Students will want to know that you are not suggesting a move away from the personal attention of the dyadic student-instructor relationship. While it may be a serious temptation to encourage a peer review in lieu of providing comments on your own, the social cost is high. Students engage in peer review because they feel they payoffs in their writing. It is unclear whether that would be the case without the concurrent role of the instructor review.

The Payoff:

On the whole, most students welcome the opportunity to offer constructive criticism. Building a team dynamic into the course reflects the “good citizenship” moral suasion we unselfishly exude professionally. It also eases students into a symbiotic relationship with a cohort. Removing social awkwardness from a classroom increases the growth potential for all involved. Peer review also serves as a form of self-discovery. Attention to a peer’s project can trigger a better understanding of our own work (see Althausser and Darnall, 2001; 23). It helps us to get a handle on where our projects sit in relation to others. It gives us a wealth of information on who shares our intellectual curiosity. Through peer review, authors also become good editors. No publishing sleuth will outclass your students when it comes to locating shortcomings and inconsistencies in an argument. Lastly, encountering reciprocity as a concept and a practice is an attractive

perk for any professor. Placing the student in that dual role as creator and reviewer, places a check on negative and destructive behavior, while educating the student in tact and consideration of others' intellectual endeavors.

Incremental Assessment and Holistic Portfolio Evaluation

It goes without saying that scholars are no longer motivated by grades. In our own lives, we have substituted any grading schema with a whole host of social, political, and economic proxies; rewards arrive in the form of faculty positions, grants, and honoraria. While we do not receive a transcript peppered with grades, our peer evaluation is perhaps more demanding. Scholarly vitae are expected to blossom, evolve, and germinate prior to a series of critical performance reviews. Political scientists are not strangers to multifaceted evaluation; however, we write and perform as scholars in a facilitating environment familiar with our needs and wants. We write to communicate a new idea, insight, or a theory about politics; some even write for status, prestige, or standing in the community. Our students are not all that different. If we take a close look at the environment in which they perform, it unnecessarily lacks many of the resources available to professional social sciences.

In addition to the professional practices already discussed, there are two more that are extremely helpful in the area of student evaluation. These practices are: 1) incremental feedback and evaluation of scholarly work, and 2) holistic (or portfolio) career assessment. After briefly summarizing the logic present in each of the above practices, it will be argued that you can mimic this dynamic with positive results in the classroom.

Incremental Evaluation

Many of our most cherished practices are the result of an accretion of professional conventions and norms. One such practice is the development of incremental evaluation as an ethic in the review of scholarship. Few scholars have their manuscript accepted for publication in its first draft form. Instead we usually guide each other through a process of multiple drafts. While the social value of this peer review process was already discussed, it is critical to acknowledge the impact of this perspective on the growth of scholarship itself. A culture of revise and resubmit is a tool for improving scholarship as much as it is an appraisal of a work's current value. Final judgment is reserved for a later version of the piece and the impetus for improvement is placed back with the scholar. The success or failure of the piece often depends on whether that advice is heard and heeded. Without engaging certain real world exceptions of when this practice fails (such as gate keeping hazards), mid-project feedback usually affords the scholar a chance to reflect, regroup, and reengage their work. Subsequent reviews do not punish the scholars for not "nailing" it on the first iteration. We as scholars are focused on the final product and place most of our emphasis on this bottom line. If a scholar submits an underdeveloped piece to a journal, the shortcomings are highlighted and suggestions for improvement are offered.

Now imagine a situation where a journal's submissions standards state that all articles have a one shot chance of getting accepted. No matter how much the scholar is willing to revise or rework a particular topic, if rejected the opportunity for the project's publication is over. Simply imagine the outrage and amount of professional harrumphing

these changes in practice would ignite among professionals. Now, the question must be asked why we sometimes do this to our undergraduates?

Good writing instruction asks the writer to take chances, follow advice, and attempt new styles of communication. We tell students to trust us; long-term investment always exceeds any short-term cost. A strange pedagogical reality stands in sharp contrast to these settled axioms. Some courses assign papers, yet do not allow for revision and resubmission. Grades are assigned on this one solitary draft. Sometimes there is only one paper in the entire semester. With one paper in one course, students move through their undergraduate major in political science exposed to a wealth of knowledge, but are saddled with writing insecurity. Although we are political scientists and politics is the subject of our courses of study, we still evaluate students writing as if they have logged a lot of practice. The problem is that one-shot assignments expect students to learn something about writing often without gaining the opportunity to rework that particular piece (Hylton and Allen, 1993: 69, Althausser and Darnall, 2001: 23). Can we learn about writing in the abstract? This is the pedagogical question we must look squarely in the eye. It is the reality we force students into. We realize that revision is a process of doing. It is something we learn by practice. In our own professional culture we practice and ethic of practice. We should not expect our students to learn by anything less.

Instructors have the opportunity of assigning a multiple stage paper. Our revise and resubmit culture of incremental review inspires patience, humility, and perseverance; yet, it also provides a somewhat captive audience. Because grades in their traditional application are a potentially disruptive part of the learning process, why not substitute for

them until the end of the assignment. In their place, you can mimic the practices of a reviewer and lend a series of qualitative assessments and personalized advice for improvement. Instructors can signal to students their current trajectory of development and offer concrete areas in need of attention. Keep advice forward looking. Allow students to know that effort is very important. Cultivate an environment where the student thinks less about the grade itself and more about the paper. When given the chance, students grub for grades less than one might imagine. Shift the environment of writing and your attitude is likely to become extremely contagious in the classroom.

Portfolio Assessment:

Every scholar, at one point or another, undergoes an evaluation of their performance at their institution. Whether for a status change or a pay raise, departments and institution inevitably look at the corpus of our work. Our careers are evaluated on the accumulation of our industry and service, our oeuvre and not our opus. In other words, when we put update our curriculum vitae for tenure review, showcases a portfolio of academic achievement and our developmental path as scholars. It is clear that there is significant variation of measures across the academy (one department's star is another's underachiever), yet the approach to evaluation is remarkably familiar. Each institution does have its own culture, yet the approach to evaluation is holistic in nature. This style of review represents the relative independence of scholars. During the period between reviews, the institution is affording a grant of intellectual freedom. Hopefully the scholar exists within an institution that has signaled the type of culture they engender and the broad stroke expectations of the individual. Armed with our freedom and charged with a

nexus of expectation, we are allowed to create. This period of time is a period of suspended anxiety. At the end of the specified period of time, the community reflects upon the corpus of the individual's work. Curriculum vitae are expected to tell a story far from static. The scholarship more often than not reflects a fluidity of identity. The track record may indicate non-linear development reflected in spurts of productivity. The dossier might also illustrate an asymmetry of talents such as methodological prowess or a wealth of voluntaristic community-minded investment. The measuring stick of advancement comes at scholars in various shapes and sizes but the approach is near ubiquitous. The advantages are obvious. Scholarship moves ahead in a relatively liberal space. Peers and institutions help to signal if we are headed in the right direction. In the end, we artificially interrupt this process to pause and measure whether we have made the grade. Overall, as much as we complain about the pressures of a review, would we have it any other way?

A portfolio approach to writing at first seems similar to any other course involving expository composition. There are major assignments, an effort component, and some wiggle room for an instructor's judgment. The major difference involves the mathematics. Traditional courses might assign three major essays during a semester each receiving 20% of the grade. A peer review component then might receive 15% of the total, while class participation is assigned a typical 10%. The remaining 15% could be made up with small ancillary assignments to the larger pieces. A portfolio approach liberalizes each of these components and takes away the artificially quality of the math. The traditional fixed percentages are there for legitimacy. They remove "objectivity" and specify all expectations in advance; the math cannot lie. Or can it? Fixed percentage

grading does not always deliver on its promise to capture performance reality: it can alter or even recreate it. Portfolios, in contrast “document the learning process over time, as well as provide evidence of learning outcomes” (Thompson, 1991: 716). A portfolio approach allows the instructor to look for trends in development, to reward the asymmetrical strength and effort of an individual student. It can embolden late bloomers and challenge the all so talented shirkers. Instructors, as they would in any other class, continue to structure the process and stress emphasis. They continue to serve as guide, mentor, and facilitator.

Conclusion

This paper presented a few alternative perspectives for teaching undergraduates to write. The tools for facilitating this paradigm shift should be very familiar to any political scientist; we use them every day. Students recognize the kind of effort required to make ourselves available when they need us most. They also appreciate an environment that privileges a diversity of learning styles. A multifaceted approach to learning allows the student a chance to demonstrate different skills and to showcase heterogeneity of talent. Combining this approach with an actively supportive community is just the kind of environment that motivates personal investment, inspires growth as a scholar, and produces concrete and measurable results in the classroom. Our own community is evidence of that reality.

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