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Writing Health and Disability:
Two Problem-Based Composition Assignments

Writing Health and Disability is an upper-level undergraduate elective offered by the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island (URI) that attracts a wide range of students, with clusters from the pharmacy program, health studies, and the writing and rhetoric major, as well as students who have disabilities or have experienced significant health issues. The course catalog explains that the course "[e]xplores the ways we experience, label, and politicize health and disability in our culture. Writing may include narratives, cultural critiques, persuasive essays, and policy proposals." While other teachers have approached the course in a variety of ways, I taught the class through problem-based writing assignments; I presented students with health and disability-related "problems" they then attempted to find solutions to through their own research and writing.

URI's Writing and Rhetoric Department is separate from the English Department, and its course offerings reflect this institutional separation of rhetoric and composition from the broader English studies umbrella. For example, URI's general education courses are often titled "Writing X," (e.g., Writing Culture [see White-Farnham 2012] and Writing Health and Disability). Those familiar with English courses can sometimes misinterpret "Writing X" classes as "Writing *about* X" classes, in which students might write analytical essays *about* texts or topics relating to health and disability. "Writing X" classes, by contrast, focus on the production of texts within that topic or field rather than on analysis of texts. The course titles reflect the departmental emphasis on providing students opportunities to use research and rhetorical strategies to craft texts that create meaning and information in a wide range of genres directed toward a wide variety of (real or imagined) audiences.

I developed my version of Writing Health and Disability as a way to combat students' perceptions of general education writing courses, which as David Chapman (2002) explains, students often see as more of an "obstacle" than an "opportunity" (259). I wanted to create the sense of opportunity. As I was crafting the course syllabus I was a URI Teaching Fellow, an institutional experience that led me to apply the concept of Problem-Based Learning, or PBL, to assignments. I'd read an article about PBL by two of my former colleagues (Pennell and Miles, 2009), but I had never experienced PBL until a class simulation in Teaching Fellows.

Playing the role of student in that simulation of a PBL class was inspiring and exciting. We read through the "messy" problem ("messy" is good in the world of PBL) and worked in a small group to discuss and find a path to a solution. Each group worked as if a real person's life actually depended on it; we were still talking about it over dinner after the meeting. I wanted to bring the excitement and sense of purpose I felt in that simulation into the new course I was preparing. I began with the thought that all writing assignments are essentially problems for students to solve anyway, so why not frame it that way through narratives that could help students feel invested and responsible.

Theoretical Rationale

David Chapman (2002) writes that one of the goals of Problem-Based Learning is "to assist the student in defining the rhetorical problem" (260). Writers are always working to solve one or more problems through their writing; a PBL assignment simply makes the problem(s) writers are working to solve more explicit. Problem-Based Learning as a structuring approach is different from, but related to, teaching with case studies or using examples to enhance student learning. Jose A. Amador, Libby Miles, and Calvin B. Peters (2006) explain in *The Practice of Problem-Based Learning* that "'full-blown' PBL" is distinct from "teaching techniques that incorporate aspects of PBL—group work, situational discussion, case studies" (12) in terms of the order. While case studies typically offer students a real (or real-seeming) example of a principle or theory students have already read about, in a PBL-based classroom, "[s]tudents begin with the

situation, and the theories and principles grow from grappling with how to address the problem" (13). I tell my students that PBL assignments work this way because they mimic real life. In real life, one isn't offered a selection of readings and theories to (possibly, maybe) apply as a problem arises. Instead, a problem presents itself and then one has to seek the information, theories, and determine how to respond to or solve that problem.

The connection of PBL to case studies is helpful, despite the differences between them. In writing problem-based assignments, I drew on theories of case study teaching. For example, in "What Makes a Good Case?," Clyde Freeman Herreid (1997/8) draws on "basic rules of good storytelling" to offer suggestions for teachers writing cases (163). His advice includes, for example, ensuring the story/problem surrounds an "interest-arousing issue"; "is relevant to the reader"; is "conflict-provoking"; and "is short" (163). Herreid says cases also must encourage readers to empathize with the characters, and be general enough that readers can learn theories and principles and practice strategies useful in a variety of contexts.

Relying on this kind of advice, I wrote the problem-based assignments for Writing Health and Disability as problems college students might have, with the goal of keeping the issues relevant and interesting—in the first problem-based assignment, for example, students are tasked with helping a (fictional) student who is struggling in school and life because of a combination of overuse of technology and lack of sleep. As students conduct research and try to answer the three main questions of a PBL assignment: *What do you know? What do you need to know? How will you find out?* I add layers to the problem to enhance their research and finally to guide them to providing deliverables/a solution in writing.

Through their research for that first problem—which ranged from medical literature on technology addiction to psychology articles about willpower to advice from various sources about how to improve sleep habits/hygiene—students came to see how this particular problem with technology and sleep is not limited to college students, but can affect anyone, and began to believe that (their) writing

could help people find solutions to those problems. Students responding to this problem created a variety of genres in response, including: a brochure that could be placed in the counseling center; a letter to the editor of a counseling journal; and a detailed training module for peer counselors to help them identify and suggest solutions for students encountering similar issues.

Another problem I assigned, in keeping with recommendations from disability studies scholars to offer student writers multisensory experiences (Dunn 2001), to encourage empathetic identification (Benin and Cartwright 2006), and to intervene in "ableist hierarchies" (Palmeri 2009, 58) opened by offering students an immersive "experience" of various disabilities, led by our campus disability resources team. Students navigated campus with various simulated disabilities (e.g., wearing glasses that mimic myopia; wearing earplugs; and moving in wheelchairs and on crutches). After this multisensory experience, which included a reflection and a discussion of inclusive terminology, students watched, discussed, and wrote about the documentary *Murderball*, which focuses on the lives and sporting experiences of Paralympians on the US quad rugby team. With this context, intended to increase empathy, in place, I presented students with a problem that asked them to place themselves in the fictional role of interns in the provost's office tasked with responding to a letter sent by a (fictional) student who had recently begun to need a wheelchair. The student wrote to the provost to bring up a variety of accessibility issues, a lack of extracurricular sporting opportunities, and an unpleasant campus climate (being stared at, for example).

In order to respond to this student's specific concerns as well as to the systemic issues the student's concerns raised, my students researched the Americans with Disabilities Act, universal design, and various ways of accommodating students with disabilities. Several students examined various campus spaces (including measuring doorways, in some cases) themselves to determine ADA compliance. Others explored campus and community resources and interviewed students and staff members on campus with disabilities to get their perspectives on campus accessibility issues overall. All of the projects that grew from this problem included multiple genres submitted together;

all began with a letter to the fictional student outlining the "university's" response and compiling available resources, but all also spoke to the larger issues of accessibility and fair treatment of people with different (dis)abilities. A sampling of other genres: a detailed report of areas in which the university was ADA compliant and areas the university needed to improve; a social media and flyer campaign to encourage awareness, acceptance, and inclusion of students with various disabilities; and a petition to add a quad rugby team to the intramural sports program.

While students are responsible for finding answers to problems like the above, teachers are responsible for crafting problems, which is a challenge: It's difficult to anticipate how much structure students will need. If a problem is too clear, students miss the opportunity to learn how to discern what needs to be solved, and miss out on research and learning opportunities. By contrast, if a problem is too ill-defined, too "messy,' it can generate too much frustration and a sense of failure, which also keep students from learning. PBL places learning in students' hands, which is where it probably should be, even though that's scary and doesn't always work out exactly as a teacher might hope.

Critical Reflection

These assignments are intended to challenge students, and as with most challenges, some students accepted that challenge with excitement, some greeted it with trepidation but grew more comfortable with time, and a few consistently resisted, finding the concept too new, too hard, or too lacking in structure for their tastes. Problem-based learning works most naturally for students who are already somewhat independent learners, or who can become so with minimal scaffolding. This population of students takes a question or a problem and runs with it, working out research avenues and solutions through trial and error and conversations with teacher and classmates. Students who initially struggle with this approach, by contrast, tend to be those who prefer very specific guidelines, answers that are unambiguously either right or wrong, and who expect the professor and assigned texts to provide all the necessary information in a course.

One successful outcome of the assignments was the amount and type of research students conducted. Because the PBL assignments don't require a minimum number of sources, students were focused on answering the question and solving the problem. As a result, students did far more research than I'd previously seen undergraduates do in any other course, and while many students relied extensively on online, non-scholarly sources, they also explored significantly more information avenues than undergraduates typically rely on without specific research requirements or significant prompting. Reasons for this wealth of research included the PBL approach, in general, but also included the fact that the student groups assigned one another research tasks as homework, rather than me telling them what to do for the next day. (The nightly homework during these assignments was always: "Do the research and writing tasks your group has assigned.") Class time devoted to exploring and playing with various library databases beyond the general databases paid off with multiple citations of medical, religious, and philosophical journals. (That exploration of various databases did not, however, stave off citations of, for example, "a study by cbs.com": there is always more work to do in terms of improving students' information literacy.) I required groups to turn in a copy of their list of assignments for group members each class. During the following class, I'd visit each group to see how they'd progressed on their self-assigned goals so we were all involved together and so I could help troubleshoot when students were stymied. Occasionally I gave feedback on their assigned lists, asking questions that might push their research further or in different research directions.

The PBL approach proved initially disconcerting to students who were used to school being about following rules and checking boxes. Sometimes students focused at first on providing the most efficient answer and product. I worked to guide them to focus on the process of exploring and researching various options in order to come to a possible "best" way of responding to the problems, rather than the fastest/easiest responses.

One of the hallmarks of PBL is to turn students' questions to professors back into questions for students to answer, whenever possible. One student had been frustrated when she asked me "Is one page long enough for this genre?" and I responded with something like, "What have you found out about that genre's conventions?" and "What do you think the audience for that piece will think?" and "Will your audience have enough information to make the best decision based on what's here?" I'm as sure as I can be that it was this same student who wrote on the anonymous evaluations at the end of class that while she was initially frustrated by my responding to her questions with questions, she came to appreciate that with these assignments it was she and her group who were charged with answering the questions, and that while I would help them get to good answers for their/the problem's purposes, what they really needed wasn't my answer.

Overall, the PBL approach worked well because it placed the emphasis on student's own interpretations of what writing and research was necessary, leading them to research and write differently, and in many ways more rigorously, than they might have for traditional assignments. Mike, a junior writing minor (later turned major), wrote in his end-of-semester reflection: "In my entire academic career, perhaps no writing class I have taken has utilized such a unique and nonlinear approach to refining writing as this course. The 'problem based' system, effectively the central framework of the course, truly challenged me…" Greg, a somewhat indifferent writing major, wrote, "This course … implores students to take responsibility for their own learning by determining how to handle various rhetorical situations." And Aubrey, a health studies student taking the course to satisfy a general education requirement, described it as an "interesting and important learning experience." Comments like these cement my belief that problem-based writing assignments provide students with a different kind of motivation and an essential experience many other kinds of assignments can't offer.

Future Plans

Having moved institutions since developing these assignments for Writing Health and Disability at URI, I won't be teaching this specific class with these assignments again. As writing program administrator at my new institution, which requires a standard first year curriculum, I have used these assignments as samples as I work to implement problem-based learning within the first year writing program and provide more options within the standardized program. The required group research project is now problem-based; our experienced teachers drafted and revised ten problems, a pool from which all teachers (mostly graduate teaching assistants) can select problems to assign. Some teachers chose to assign one problem to a class, with each group crafting their own research question from the scenario; others gave student groups a set of problems to choose from themselves. In my teaching practicum last fall, after teaching with the provided problem scenarios, new GTAs were tasked with writing their own. A selection of these will be added to the group of scenarios all teachers can select from for spring semester, while others will be rotated out. This annual infusion of new problems will enable us to continue to refresh and add to the selection of problems students can be assigned to respond to for the group research project, keeping the process of problem-based learning ongoing and responsive to the issues of the moment.

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