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WRITING INSTRUCTION IN ECONOMICS COURSES:
EXPERIMENTATION ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Donald Marvin Tobey

We economists value writing skills, holding expectations that our students from introductory through graduate level courses be able "to represent one's analysis and evaluation of an issue in a way which will communicate effectively to others" (Weidenaar, p. 99). We have assumed, over the years, that a certain amount of such communication will be in writing. We often have held, furthermore, expectations that the analytical writing will be of high quality.

We usually have assumed, at the same time, that writing skills will be taught elsewhere, not in our economics courses. This assumption appears well grounded, for we hold professional respect for those faculty who teach English composition. Just as we would not expect them to teach economics, we would hesitate to suggest that we could effectively teach English writing.

In recent years, however, many of us have noticed that our students' writing skills appear to fulfill our hopes and expectations less often than they previously did; the change has occurred, in many cases, as non-traditional adult learners and students matriculating under relaxed admissions standards have increased in number. We have lamented this apparent decline, and we sometimes have been openly critical of "those English teachers" at both the high school and college levels. Occasionally we have channeled our concerns more positively, encouraging our college and university English faculty to tailor courses along the lines of technical writing, writing for business and science, and the like. Courses of this nature are potentially helpful, particularly when we can assist through providing sample assignments, manuscript format requirements, and such from our own profession.

At the risk of appearing to wave too dramatically the flag of "back to basics," this writer suggests that we economists can do far more than exhort our English faculty to offer better and more pertinent instruction. While the consensus among us would certainly be that we should not "teach English" in lieu of economics, we could do a great deal to reinforce the writing skills which our students have learned or are in the process of learning elsewhere.

AN EXPERIMENT: WRITING AND ECONOMICS COMBINED

During the academic years 1977-8 and 1978-9, the writer participated

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in a project as part of the Grants in Writing Program supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The goals of the project were: (1) to develop a method for evaluating student writing and for teaching writing in disciplines other than English; and (2) the training of faculty from other disciplines in design and evaluation of writing assignments with attention to form, correctness, and content (Herrington, p. 4).

The project was aimed at strengthening and refining a process of examination of writing competency. Our institution had initiated such an examination, on a trial basis, in the fall semester of 1976. The underlying premise was that "a competency examination is a better measure of writing ability than a grade in a writing course which necessarily reflects extraneous criteria such as attendance, assignments completed, and effort" (Herrington, p. 5). The examination, administered initially during a student's sophomore year, must be passed at some point as a graduation requirement. Should a student fail the examination on the first attempt, writing faculty and academic advisor use the results for diagnostic purposes in counseling him/her in choice of writing courses or in other strategies aimed at remedying identified areas of weakness.

The writing competency program and the 1977-9 project incorporate the premise that writing is a process involving critical thinking as well as the manipulation of language (Herrington, p. 4). This premise corresponds neatly with economists' concerns that students be able to "articulate sound reasons for the choice" between alternative approaches to issues and to transfer facts and exercise their analytical capabilities in solving problems and making decisions (Boehlje and Eidman p. 987). Thus, the inclusion of work on persuasive, effective writing in an economics course reflects a relationship which can be more complementary than competitive.

The writer has observed such complementarity while offering, as sample or model courses under the project, four courses of potential interest to NAEC members: a one-semester, issues-oriented survey of economics; introductory macroeconomic principles; intermediate rural sociology; and survey research methodology. While any gains have been modest and the process surely is labor-intensive in nature, participation in the cross-disciplinary project has been stimulating and has appeared to reinforce instructional effectiveness.

RESULTS AND SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

A major realization emerging from project participation has been that the aspects of "good writing" which appear most crucial to the economics profession extend well beyond the basic grammatical and mechanical skills which can be so annoying when absent from students' written work. For our purposes as economists, we must look beyond those "editorial" matters and concern ourselves with specific and appropriate word choice and with organized rhetorical development which encompasses the presentation of ideas in a reasoned, persuasive fashion. These fundamental characteristics of sound writing are necessities if our students are to "develop the analytical and communication skills" (Weidenaar, p. 96) and be trained in "the process of orderly thinking about economic problems" (Kelly, p. 105) which

economists themselves have identified as essential. While the correlation may not be perfect, good writing is good content when writing is viewed from this perspective.

How do we assist our economics students in writing effectively? While there are no magic answers, the project experience has generated some suggested strategies. Most of these strategies incorporate two common elements: (1) reinforcement of knowledge and skills the students have gained in English courses rather than teaching such skills anew; and (2) greater efforts on the instructor's part to achieve clarity in assigning written work and in responding to the completed assignments.

By presenting the strategies and techniques identified below, the writer does not intend to suggest that all economists currently ignore such considerations. No doubt all of us incorporate some of them in our instruction, and a few may use some version of virtually every one. It is probably safe to observe, however, that most of us could assist our students in learning economics and in becoming better writers by consistently using more of these approaches than we do at present.

The suggestions:

- A. Emphasize to the students, from the start of the course, that clear, effective writing is one of the best ways for them to demonstrate their grasp of the subject matter.
- B. Explore a rich variety of writing assignments, beyond the rather traditional research papers and reviews of books or articles. Economists may assign, for example, business-related letters or "memoranda" on issues of governmental policy (Kelly, p. 108). Recognize that an assignment need not be lengthy to demonstrate both writing skill and conceptual comprehension.
- C. When assigning a research paper, treat it as a process supported by conferences (with the student) regarding choice and focus of topic, analytical approach, and potential sources. Provide opportunity for revision of at least one draft of the entire paper or a significant portion.
- D. Consider a series of writing assignments, over the semester, which progress in difficulty of conceptual analysis as well as in the demands for skills or techniques placed on the student: for example, from mere description through integration of concepts to more rigorous evaluation of policy alternatives.
- E. Work to enhance the clarity with which you assign writing tasks. A useful technique is identification for the student of the goal of the assignment, the role he/she is to play, the audience (including assumed level of knowledge) to be addressed, and the specific criteria by which you will evaluate the assignment.

- F. In evaluating the product, make it clear to the student how well his/her response has met the criteria, and why. Consider allowing revisions or counting writing as a certain percentage of the grade. (The writer has found it most useful to grade on subject matter content, but to require revision if the quality of writing is not sufficient.)

The approaches identified above can be, at a modest but definite level, successful. The writer feels that the majority of students in his project-linked courses have demonstrated gains in analytical skills and in written communication of their ideas and application of concepts. The students themselves, perhaps more importantly, have reacted favorably to the project. At the end of the initial year, evaluations from the majority of students in the participating "content" (disciplines other than English) courses indicated that the emphasis on writing had added a great deal to their grasp of subject matter. While several noted persistent difficulty in organizing their thoughts and realized need for further improvement in their analytical writing, the general tone of comments was firmly more positive than discouraged.

PROFESSIONAL TRENDS AND POTENTIAL COMPLEMENTARITY

In our profession, effective instruction has been allocated only a miniscule percentage of total published words and pages. Within those relatively few pages dealing with instruction, effective writing has received little more than an occasional passing comment. Few would dispute the value of good writing or its role in communicating ideas, yet we too often appear to take such writing for granted until some poorly executed prose gives us occasion to grumble.

That attitude toward writing is partially explained, perhaps, by the fact that writing has not been viewed as particularly exciting. As our profession has moved, for excellent reasons and with commendable results, toward greater quantification and the use of technology, the written word has been accorded little attention. What writers in our field have hailed excitedly as "the transition from traditional to innovative for the teacher and student" (O'Connor and Osterman, p. 985) has consisted largely of modular instruction, audio-visual adaptations, and the application of simulation and gaming models to teaching in and beyond the classroom.

Many of our textbooks, instructor's manuals, and workbooks for students reflect the de-emphasis of writing. These materials, not totally but with increasing frequency, appear to reflect a change away from the integrative, written answer which requires both the application of concepts and the organized, persuasive development of an analytical "case." Thus, what the economics profession has viewed as instructional innovation may too often have resulted in a substitution of other skills for the more traditional written word. The potential for complementary analytical and reporting techniques is great, but such potential can only be realized if we educators combine and blend the pertinent ingredients rather than merely substituting one for another.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

It would be totally unrealistic to convert our economics courses into replacements for existing offerings in English composition. We have, after all, a body of knowledge in our field which we attempt to convey in any given course. While that body of knowledge is flexible, the flexibility is not infinite. Our limited resources of time, energy, and perhaps professional expertise dictate concentration on economic content.

It appears, however, realistic to think that we can take pains to reinforce writing skills rather than attempting to teach them in full.

Each of us who has ever described his/her course in terms of "competencies addressed," for example, has almost certainly dealt with the application of concepts to solving economic problems, the analysis of alternative methods of production or distribution, and the like. Presentation of such integrative, analytical conclusions requires careful and productive use of the skills the student has learned in composition courses. But if the economics instructor does not insist that those skills be used and does not make such expectations clear to the student, both the quality of work and the knowledge gained by the student stand to suffer.

Even when committing ourselves to supporting good writing through reinforcement of skills, however, we must beware of the trap of merely focusing on the most quickly identified and easily tackled problems. Shaughnessy has described an early stage of faculty development as "Converting the Natives." In this stage the instructor becomes an excited, evangelistic "mechanic of the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay," feeling that he/she need only present a few simple rules and formulas to transform receptive but ignorant students into writers of model prose (Shaughnessy, p. 236). In practice, the process is far less easy and infinitely more frustrating. Elevating the quality of written English requires both recognition of the causes of writing problems and careful assessment of the instructor's own skills, approaches to teaching, and level of commitment.

Clearly, reinforcement of writing skills does not come "free of charge." Despite the direct and logical connection between rhetorical development and persuasive presentation of economic content, extra effort is required if the economist is to evaluate and comment on English as such. That effort may be minimized if the instructor sets conservative goals and works only on one or two components of writing: for example, clarity of word choice and structuring an effective conclusion. But a certain amount of extra time and energy will be necessary, regardless. This raises evident questions if we assume that the instructor's resources are fully employed without the additional emphasis on students' writing. Further questions of faculty load, expectations, and evaluation quickly arise if we hypothetically envision a college or university administration which commits itself to raising the institution's quality of writing by requiring all faculty to make specific work on writing a component of every course.

Writing, as a form of communication of ideas, is fully as important to economics as it is to any other discipline. Merely exhorting instructors of composition courses to teach more effectively is a strategy of dubious value if we want our students to advance in their ability to apply and persuasively articulate the concepts of economics. The cross-disciplinary

approach of making writing improvement a recognized component of our courses holds great potential. By taking that approach, we economists can effectively and consistently reinforce the skills which our students are learning in English courses. We can, at the same time, supplement our students' conceptual knowledge and enhance their facility in analytically presenting that knowledge to a critical audience.

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