

A Writing Experiment with E-papers and E-mail

by Chris Hunter, Professor of Sociology

I have become increasingly frustrated in recent years by how I use "term papers" in courses. Consider the process: I assign a term paper; sometime later the student wanders off to the library to "do research" and (very near the end of the semester) writes the paper; I comment on and grade the paper; the student looks at the grade and puts the paper away. Not a satisfying learning experience. In this scenario, because the paper is written for me alone, the student may well read my comments as idiosyncratic; because no one else reads the paper, no one else benefits from the student's work; because the student often does not have an opportunity to rewrite the paper, the student can't improve on the "draft." Is it any wonder that students too often find writing term papers frustrating and unsatisfying and that I (and presumably other faculty members) too often find reading term papers unenlightening and depressing?

In the past I have tried to increase students' interest in term papers by scheduling class time at the end of the semester for student presentations and discussion of their findings. I have found this process to be moderately successful in getting students to write for a larger audience than just me. However, I have been loath to take up class time for this purpose (well over a week is necessary in large classes), especially since students often find it hard to translate a written paper into an oral presentation and since discussions are often hindered when students haven't had a chance to read the papers ahead of time. Students need to practice giving oral presentations, true, but I haven't found these paper presentations to be an effective way to help them become more orally proficient.

And I have in the past tried to get students to improve their papers by permitting (or requiring) them to rewrite, but I am irritated when they see my comments as idiosyncratic or see me as providing a convenient proof-reading service and nothing more.

Driven by frustration, by a larger-than-expected class, and by too little time to accommodate the syllabus, I tried an experiment last semester in a 200-level class of 26. In most ways the experiment was a success, but nagging details complicated the process.

I had students write a proposal for their final paper, which I read and discussed with them individually, as I normally do. However, instead of having them write a single (final) draft of the paper, I told the class that each would write a draft which (if time permitted) I would read and comment on but not grade. Furthermore, each of them would read and comment on five other papers. (I picked that number out of convenience and in order to expose each student to a range of papers and comments.) Then, based on those comments, they would rewrite their paper and submit it by the end of the final week of classes.

I hoped that the processes of writing their own evaluations of five papers and of reading those written about their own paper might teach them more about how to write critical commentary and might, eventually, enable them to reread their own papers more critically in the future. And the final drafts might be better. I wanted the comments themselves to focus on logic, structure,

coherence, and adequacy, rather than grammar and the like, so I did three things: First, I distributed by e-mail a hypothetical sample evaluation so that they had a model of what to write in their evaluations and how. Second, and herein lies the first part of the experiment, I required that they submit their paper electronically, by putting it in an electronic folder on my computer (my electronic "in-basket") which I had made accessible through the Mac net. I suggested, in fact, that they read the five papers on the computer, without printing them out. Third, and herein lies the second part of the experiment, I required that they submit their comments by e-mail to me and to the student author. The result was a computer file of student papers to which everyone had immediate access and a large series of e-mail messages, which I copied into MS Word.

Submitting papers electronically saved paper and also made it hard for readers to focus comments on "picky" grammatical issues rather than "overall" issues. Similarly, using e-mail for submitting comments made the comments more immediate, more easily readable, and more easily archived. (E-mail is date- and time-stamped, so I had a record of when students did their work.) Most of the student comments met my expectations by focusing on logic and structure, though many students offered less useful commentary than I. Some students were very insightful in their comments, so at least "their" 5 student authors had useful reviews; some students were more pro-forma in their evaluations, but no student received more than one of these less useful reviews. Although my own comments were more extensive than those made by the students, we basically agreed in our reactions, so my comments presumably looked less idiosyncratic to the authors. Because of the process of electronic submission, I too was encouraged to limit myself to overall comments. As a result, my red pen sat unused, which helped me read the papers more quickly and kept me from acting like a proof-reading service. I was actually able to read and critique the 24 out of 26 papers which had been submitted on time.

The process of reading others' comments seemed to help the students rewrite their papers. The rewritten papers in some cases were dramatically improved, and in all but three cases were somewhat improved. Two of the papers which were not improved were those which had not been written in time to receive comments, so their failure helps convince me that the process of commenting was useful. Only one student disregarded everyone's comments, but he later indicated he did so on purpose (unfortunately). Because I had all these comments in various computer files, I was able easily to append the comments to the final papers in order to remind students of problems I and others had seen in the draft.

At the end of the semester, I asked students to comment by e-mail on this process. Almost all of them offered comments, and only one student said he disliked the process. The other students liked reading other papers, having feedback on their own paper, and being able to rewrite the final paper in this way. However, they wished they had had an earlier deadline for the first draft and thus had had more time to prepare the comments and to rewrite their own paper.

The process itself had a few hitches, all of which can be solved. First, a surprisingly large number of students had no idea of how to put papers on the LAN, so I did a lot of tutoring about our computer system (and had to learn some in the process). Second, translating between Mac and PC word processing programs isn't as transparent or as easy as it should be. Third, I didn't provide enough time for the students to read and respond to others' papers, so some students were more rushed in making their comments and in rewriting their papers than need be. Fourth, I

had not at first thought to tell students to copy "their" five papers from my "shared" computer folder onto the hard drive of the computer they were using; if I had, I might not have had to put up with a dozen students accessing my hard drive repeatedly while reading their papers. Fifth, I didn't restrict access to my "shared" folder to members of the class, so anyone could read these papers; I will restrict access next time. Sixth, keeping track of so many e-mail comments (approximately 130) was a pain, but a manageable one.

Overall, I believe the experiment was successful, and I will try it again the next time I teach this class, and perhaps in others.