

Producing Better Writers in Sociology: A Programmatic Approach

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Abstract

High-quality undergraduate student writing is a common and important objective for sociology programs while at the same time a continuous challenge. Programs often struggle to address writing adequately because of the difficulty of fully evaluating student writing and responding to any identified limitations, largely because of the impact on faculty workload. A comprehensive evaluation followed by a response to student writing in a large program was conducted by all faculty members. The result of the student writing analysis was the development of a departmental writing rubric, along with programmatic response to identified writing issues. After evaluation of student writing, key areas were identified with which students struggled (argumentative thesis development, citation, revision). These limitations were addressed using a consistent approach that was integrated into the core curriculum to address student writing in a more systematic manner, which minimized the impact on faculty workload.

Keywords

writing, programmatic, writing across the curriculum

At any gathering of sociologists one hears complaints about student writing. Students do not write enough, they cannot write clear and logical essay examinations, they cannot structure a sentence, nor a paragraph, much less a term paper. We often blame poor student writing on failures in secondary education or in freshman composition courses, on deprived family and neighborhood backgrounds, or on a generally lessened literacy in the United States. We conclude that the solution to the problem of student writing is to toughen up high school English courses, to introduce a college-level remedial course or to create special skills programs. We sociologists complain and fret, but, in the end, we usually shift the responsibility for establishing and maintaining writing proficiency away from ourselves to our colleagues in the English Department, to enrichment programs, or back onto the students themselves. (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982:359)

Cadwallader and Scarboro's concerns about sociology undergraduates' writing abilities in 1982 persist among faculty in sociology programs today. Sociology departments generally recognize the need to teach students to be better writers due to the impact this primary skill has on both their advanced study and future careers (Hudd, Sardi, and Lopriore 2013). The American Sociological Association (ASA) produced guidelines for assessing sociology programs (Lowry et al. 2005), which included identifying specific, common learning outcomes that a department desires students to obtain as a major. A common department learning goal was for students to "write clearly in order to communicate

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sociological content” (Lowry et al. 2005:47) or at least to “communicate effectively,” which includes writing skills as sociology majors.

Although writing is regularly required within sociology programs (Grauerholz, Eisele, and Stark 2013), many faculty members argue that teaching the nuts and bolts of how to write should be left to English departments. Furthermore, assessing writing is often perceived as an unwelcome demand upon departments. While ability and willingness to teach and assess writing are common obstacles for faculty in sociology, there exists an opportunity for sociology faculty to help students to become writers in the field of sociology, as they are the experts in writing in sociology. Furthermore, educating students on how to write within sociology has been found to have the spillover effect of helping students develop their critical thinking skills (Grauerholz et al. 2013; Massengill 2011). In order to minimize the impact that the focus on writing improvement can have on faculty workload, departments can approach this learning objective programmatically (Day 1989), which also addresses program assessment needs. Furthermore, any student writing skill development will aid faculty in their attempts to increase student knowledge of the field and promotion of a sociological imagination. In line with a collective response, our department conducted a comprehensive assessment of our majors’ writing skills, followed by a programmatic response to promote the development of student writing skills, while not overburdening faculty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2004, an ASA task force on the undergraduate sociology major suggested that departments develop a comprehensive program that advocates for student learning through a cumulative engagement of skills, which included the intention “to improve their written . . . communication skills” (McKinney et al. 2004:ii). Essentially, departments should address any learning outcome as a process, making sure that students are developing the skills throughout a program and not just in specific isolated courses. In Allen’s (2004) general discussion of assessment of academic programs, she argues that programs need to determine not only that all learning outcomes are being taught to students in the program but that there is a process for developing skills throughout a program. For example, not all research methods need to be learned in a methods course, but rather, students can be exposed to and engage in different research methodologies in substantive courses.

A commonly used tool to ascertain programmatic process of learning is a course matrix, which identifies the courses in which each learning outcome is being engaged and at what developmental level. To utilize the matrix at a deeper level beyond simply if faculty are requiring a writing learning goal in a class, we asked faculty to identify at what level they are requiring students to engage each of the areas of writing in each of their classes. We used the following terms to describe three levels of learning: (1) introducing the ideas to students (I), (2) practicing the skill (P), and (3) demonstrating student ability to perform the outcome (D) (for further discussion, see Allen 2004). The course matrix helps a program to identify where students are being introduced to the ideas, practicing the skills, and then demonstrating they are competent in the skills. The development process of teaching falls in line with the ASA’s assertion that learning is a process and programs should engage it as such (McKinney and Howery 2007).

Writing across the Curriculum

Approaching writing pedagogy from an interdisciplinary perspective is important for success, as it clarifies that the process of learning to write persists throughout the college experience, with each educational area (discipline-specific or college-focused writing education) contributing to the development of the skill (Hudd et al. 2013). Writing should also be engaged as a process and not solely as a way to produce outcomes or display knowledge (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982; Roberts 1993). Writing a paper is not only about conveying ideas but about developing an idea throughout the course of writing (Kolb, Longest, and Jensen 2013). It is not a “one-shot” experience. An important part of the process that has been shown to have a consistent impact on writing is review and revision of writing, especially if it involves feedback from another person (peer, faculty, tutor, etc.; Schiff 1982). Writing includes editing and revising, which students assume occurs only for “poor” writers and commonly do not realize is an essential part of the process for all writers (Anderson and Holt 1990; Roberts 1993). Introducing to students the need for all writers (including the faculty members) to revise papers articulates to students the actual processes in which experienced writers engage (Edwards 2002). Helping students to see the process of writing, including the need for revision as opposed to writing for a grade, aids students in developing their writing skills (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982), as it helps

students to perceive that any paper “is never really done” (Muldoon 2009:68).

Roberts (1993) argues that writing is fundamentally a social experience and should be taught to students in this manner. Students, however, fear sharing their writing because they are personal in nature. In fact, as Muldoon (2009) presents, just as faculty often are defensive of reviews (struggling even to revise papers, much less to send them out again), similar barriers exist for students. Students who are taught to engage the *social* process of writing “start to take ownership” of it (Roberts 1993:318), which not only enhances writing but will also limit plagiarism (Ritter 2005). Beyond developing as writers, writing helps to develop understanding of course concepts (Bean 2011; Kolb et al. 2013, Young and Fulwiler 1986) as well as enhance critical thinking (Kolb et al. 2013; Roberts 1993). Heightened comprehension and critical thinking are enhanced, in part, because students are better able to communicate their level of comprehension because their writing process and skills have improved along with their interest in writing (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982).

Beyond revision, writing more papers in general enhances writing skills (Bean 2011; Ciabattari 2013). Offering them an opportunity to write more papers aids students in developing their own personal writing process while simultaneously making them more comfortable with writing in general. While Day (1989) found that intensive evaluation by faculty on student writing is necessary for student writing to grow, recent research shows that low-stakes writing also has a positive impact on student writing development (Kolb et al. 2013), allowing faculty to offer more papers without adding extensively to their workload. Just as with the development of a process of writing for each paper, writing more papers increases student comprehension of course concepts and critical thinking skills (Bean 2011; Kolb et al. 2013). “Practicing the writing conventions of that discipline and that learning to write and writing to learn are intrinsically interrelated” (Ciabattari 2013:61).

Developing writing within a discipline is a driving focus of Writing across the Curriculum, which advocates for removing the responsibility of writing from English programs and moving the task, in part, to each department so that students within each major learn to write in a way that is representative of the discipline (Bazerman et al. 2005). Faculty, and each department as a whole, need to “share the responsibility of helping students to become better writers” (Day 1989:458). Learning to write through major

courses can benefit students because they are more effective in their writing when they are familiar with the subject matter (McCulley and Soper 1986). While assuming responsibility for writing does involve the development of writing-intensive classes within each discipline (Anderson and Holt 1990), it extends beyond this with the implementation of writing education throughout a curriculum (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982; Ciabattari 2013). Integrating writing education throughout a major’s curriculum is especially important because students are being educated on how to write by the same faculty who are most likely grading them on their ability to convey ideas through writing. Writing is graded by faculty who have discipline-specific expectations that determine the evaluation of writing (Kolb et al. 2013). Faculty often rely on “a feeling” of good writing, and not a standard for writing, meaning they rely on their own educational background that is grounded in their discipline to determine quality writing (Day 1989). To accomplish the integration of writing education throughout the curriculum, a department should establish consistent criteria for writing that all faculty can draw upon and with which all students in the major can become familiar.

A model for a department-wide writing effort was recently developed at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU; Ciabattari 2013). The faculty engaged in intensive meetings, both with one another and then later, as a part of the program, with each student. The effort is laudable, drawing from the ASA suggestion for a cumulative curriculum (Howery and Rodriguez 2006), but difficult to accomplish in larger programs. Still, the intention and process of the PLU faculty are important to consider as a department works to “institutionalize a culture of good writing” (Stokes, Roberts, and Kinney 2002:38). With a similar goal in mind, another collaborative of faculty at another, larger university developed a collective response to student writing (Burgess-Proctor et al. 2014), which was predicated largely on the efforts and interests of the involved faculty’s courses. While important to be developed from interested faculty, relying on the passion and efforts of only interested faculty does not allow for a programmatic impact on student writing, meaning that students who fail to take one of the classes taught by a faculty member in the collective may not learn the skills that are being introduced. To truly influence the writing of sociology majors, the practice needs to be fully integrated into the program.

While the overall focus and practice of the PLU program should be considered for any program

desiring to implement a writing program, the process of developing a writing culture will necessarily be influenced by the culture and structure of the program, in particular, its focus, size, and student body characteristics. PLU is a smaller program characterized by four distinct levels of course work, whereas in our much larger program, there are only lower division and upper division, with limited ability to sequence courses at the higher level. There is a sequence for the statistics and methods courses, but all writing cannot be housed in these courses. The remaining core courses are designed to be taken at particular points in the curriculum, but because of space limitation, students take the courses when they are available, limiting consistency for when students take a course. Even with the greater sequential structure, PLU also struggled with this issue, with students taking higher-level courses without having taken the lower-level courses and thus were not introduced to the introductory skill set to build upon in the higher-level courses.

Over the course of several years, we conducted a programmatic assessment of student writing and concretized a “writing culture” that informed learning objectives and rubrics used to evaluate student writing throughout the program. We began by assessing a baseline of student skills and then implementing a programmatic response that ensured that all students would be tasked with meeting these writing requirements and expectations. We undertook the process of instituting a writing culture into the department, keeping in mind the workload concerns of the faculty in the department while not trying to minimize or oversimplify the process. Below, we describe the process we undertook, including the assessment and response to the findings.

PROGRAMMATIC ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

Our process involved evaluating student writing, assessing areas of struggle and identifying potential responses at a program level to address writing limitations. The first step involved a comprehensive evaluation of student writing to determine specific issues with which students struggled. From the comprehensive evaluation, we conducted an analysis using a specially designed rubric to identify a baseline of student writing. Finally, we developed a department response that would give students tools to help improve their writing.

To identify specific struggles that students have in their writing, while being mindful of faculty workload, we conducted the assessment of student

writing over the course of three years, which allowed a five-person faculty committee to evaluate 10 papers from a different core class each semester. Each paper was reviewed twice, resulting in each faculty member reviewing approximately four papers per semester. Faculty read the papers and then offered their evaluation on a list of areas for each paper: thesis statement, organization, grammar, evidence, critical analysis, sociological perspective, and use of social concepts. These areas were determined by suggestions from the Writing across the Curriculum faculty on campus. Initially there were no areas of concentration, as the intention was to conduct a grounded theory analysis of student writing (for a full discussion, see Migliaccio and Melzer 2011), but faculty struggled to give thorough feedback without some level of structure to guide them, so common areas were identified. While faculty reviews gave a sense of writing struggles of students in the major, what was actually analyzed were faculty evaluations of student writing, since it is as important to understand how faculty look at and evaluate papers as it is to try to look at how students write (Kolb et al. 2013).

Three key areas were identified with which students had the most problems: thesis development and focus throughout, editing, and citation (in both use and format). While suggestions were made to aid in addressing these issues in the program, such as having students use ASA citation in all papers, one prominent outcome from the analysis was the design of a sociology writing rubric, which was a modification of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ VALUE Written Communication Rubric.

Following the conclusion of the initial writing assessment, the department desired to establish a baseline of student writing using the recently designed rubric. A baseline would allow the department to identify present struggles as well as to measure changes in student writing as adjustments were implemented. We gathered a cluster sample of 30 papers from our majors throughout the program. We randomly selected one Introduction to Sociology course (Soc 1; beginning students), one Statistics course (Soc 101; students midway through the program), and one Research Methods Lab course (Soc 102b; students close to graduation) to be able to evaluate students at each level of our program. All students in all three courses were given the same prompt and accompanying article (“Cheating Hearts”; Carr 2010), an article that is academic yet not so theoretical that it might limit a

Table 1. Writing Scores for Sociology Students.

Area	Group A (Soc 1)	Group B (Soc 101)	Group C (Soc 102b)
Thesis	1.5	1.45	2.05
Organization	1.7	1.5	2.3
Grammar	1.85	2.5	2.75
Evidence	1.8	1.1	2.35
Clarity	1.4	1.45	2.55
ASA citation	0.15	0.2	1.55

Note: All scores given are averages of the papers reviewed within a given group of students (beginning, middle, finishing), with a range of 0 to 4 in any given area (see appendix). ASA = American Sociological Association.

student's ability to engage and understand the ideas presented in the article, which would limit his or her ability to write a response. The following prompt was given to all students:

Read the article about infidelity. In your paper, evaluate one claim made in the article on infidelity and consider how groups (gender, race, age, etc.) are differently impacted by infidelity. You are encouraged to use multiple academic sources of sociological information, such as information/data from the article, material from class, and information from outside of class (in particular, from other classes) to support your ideas.

Read the article and write the paper, due one week from today in class. The response should be two to three double-space pages, 12-point font, with 1-inch margins.

The prompt was designed to inform students of what was required of them in the paper without focusing them too much, which could potentially bias the baseline writing assessment. A team of three faculty members evaluated the papers, starting by norming three papers (one from each level). After norming, every paper was evaluated by two members of the committee unless there was a disagreement concerning the rubric score of the paper. If there was, the third committee member assessed the paper, determining the rubric score of the paper. Of the remaining 27 papers, only one necessitated a third reviewer, showing a high level of interrater reliability.

Students who are just beginning our program struggle in all areas of writing, and many are unprepared for writing at the collegiate level. The weakest area was citation (score of 0.15, with a score range of 0–4; see Table 1). As one might expect, none of the students beginning the sociology major use ASA citation style, but few used any consistent form of citation.

The strongest area was grammar and mechanics (1.85), but it was still below the benchmark standard (2.5 is the departmentally established benchmark for each of the areas). Students performed almost as well on the use of evidence (1.8) but still struggled by relying too much on one or two sources, in particular, relying heavily on the article that was provided with the prompt. The next two areas were strongly linked: organization (1.7), which showed a limited connection between ideas, much less a central theme, which was supported by the lack of a central thesis throughout the papers (thesis: 1.5). Finally, the clarity of the overall ideas expressed in the paper (1.4) was the least developed, identifying that the papers needed significant revision throughout to have greater clarity.

For students in the middle of their career as undergraduate sociology majors, their writing was not significantly better than that of the beginning students. There was achievement of the benchmark in one area: grammar and mechanics (2.5), which suggests that students are gaining this skill through their other writing courses. There was a drop in three of the areas (thesis, organization, and evidence) and only a slight increase in the other two (summary, ASA citation). While the decline was a concern, what was noted by the evaluators was that the students struggled in at least two of the areas (thesis and organization) because they were attempting to develop a more technical rhetorical style as opposed to the more simplified descriptive style demonstrated by the beginning students. This transition in styles resulted in confusing and awkward statements and general disorganization. While there was only a slight increase in the quality of the summation and clarity of the papers (1.45), the more complex paper ideas engaged by these students did not negatively impact the general clarity of the remainder of the papers.

Even with this notation of students' developing more complex writing, there persisted two areas of

concern in student writing in our program from the analysis. One is the limited ability for students to use ASA citation (much less any citation) in their papers, and the other is the limited use of evidence, which declined significantly from beginning students (1.1). While a concern, the decline in the use of evidence, and likely the use of citation, may also be related to student development of more complex ideas in their writing, as they focused more on the ideas they were developing and not on the importance of using evidence to support the ideas. Furthermore, the complex ideas were about thinking beyond the paper, so the use of the article that was submitted with the text was less likely to be used than with the beginning students, who were more likely to be summarizing ideas from the given article. Furthermore, the limitation with the students' writing at the middle level may be related to a methodological issue in that we did not distinguish between native and transfer students. This means there may be a mix of students who have been in the university for several years along with students newly transferred to our program from a community college. Future analyses of student writing will consider this distinction.

There is a dramatic shift in student writing during the last part of their time in our program. This is an important finding, as we have the majority of our contact with our students during their final two years in the university and thus have the greatest impact on student learning. As a result, the gains being made in writing are most likely related to requirements in our courses and program in general.

There was an increase in all areas of student writing between the middle-level and finishing students. Students completing our program exceed the department-established benchmark in two areas: grammar (2.75) and summary and clarity (2.55). Students are close to the benchmark on two of the areas: organization (2.3) and evidence (2.35). In terms of the use of evidence, our students struggled with this in the earlier levels, suggesting that our program is helping to improve paper organization and student use of evidence in their papers.

Our students continue to struggle with thesis development (2.05). Students still rely on more descriptive and often general statements, with no clear focused argument around which to organize the paper. Finally, the weakest area continued to be the use of citations, in particular, ASA citation style. While dramatically improved (1.55) from the two previous student groups, with the majority of students using citations, and even some using ASA

at least in parts of the paper, students have still not been able to achieve the established department benchmark.

Overall, we saw that there was development of student writing in our program over time, with more complex ideas emerging from papers, while students persisted in struggling with writing an argumentative thesis. By the end of the program, the students have learned important skills but not enough to be considered fully competent with their writing as they graduate from our program (or at least not at the level we deemed as being competent writers as sociology graduates). We also noted that improvements in student writing are not linear, with student writing becoming more problematic in some areas as they shift from a more general writing style to a more technical, discipline-specific style, causing rubric scores to dip. The faculty assessment committee identified that there are three key struggles for students that limit their writing: thesis development, revision/editing, and proper use of citation. Considering our findings from our three-year writing assessment that was used to develop the writing rubric, the conclusions derived from the rubric-based assessment in stage 2 support the findings in stage 1.

Using Allen's (2004) instructional hierarchy of introduction, practice, and demonstration, two of the areas in the writing rubric (grammar and structure/clarity) are assumed to be introduced and practiced in the general education courses. This means that in sociology courses, faculty only need to have students demonstrate their ability in grammar and structure/clarity in their writing. On the basis of our assessment, students achieved the desired level in these two areas by the time they graduated from the university (and for grammar, by the time they reached our upper-division course work). In regard to the remaining areas (thesis, citation, evidence, organization), we identified that students are being required to "demonstrate" their ability in these areas, but our courses are not "introducing" the skills nor allowing "practice" of these skills. The noted absence of introduction and engagement with the skills does not mean individual faculty did not attempt to do so, but there was no programmatic focus to make sure all students were introduced to and required to practice these writing skills. While the assumption is that they can be introduced and practiced through the university general education program, there are often discipline-based expectations that influence each of these and are reflected in the evaluation of student writing (Kolb et al. 2013).

In particular, the use and formatting of citations was consistently the biggest struggle for our students. While ASA is not as commonly used as other citation formats, it is the one used in the discipline. Furthermore, it was not so much that students were unable to use ASA citation format specifically but rather that students were not consistently utilizing any form of citation, if they were citing at all. We identified which classes required ASA citation, finding that most of the core courses required that students demonstrate this skill, but we were unable to find courses in which this skill was being introduced and/or practiced.

Programmatic Response to Improve Student Writing

To adequately respond to our student writing, we needed to institute a change in the curriculum that would reach all of our majors. Our sociology department is composed of 14 full-time and 22 part-time faculty members, who serve more than 800 undergraduate majors from diverse backgrounds, many of whom are first-generation college students. Through the analysis, we realized we needed to have students develop their writing skills in three key areas: developing an argumentative thesis, revising papers, and citation usage (in particular, using ASA style). To make sure that all of our majors experienced additional instruction in these areas, the department agreed to explicitly address these skills in all of our core classes (except for the Statistics course). The intention was that students could not miss (by chance or intention) these educational practices. By requiring them in all core classes, students would be forced to experience the writing instruction in at least five courses, allowing for a cumulative education on writing. In other words, we would inundate them with writing ideas, what has been called “reaffirmative redundancy” (Burgess-Proctor et al 2014:136). The format in which they are introduced may differ, but the intention overall is to have students practice and develop the three areas of writing consistently throughout the program.

One response we considered was how to introduce ideas earlier, which might help when asking students to practice (much less demonstrate) these skills later in the program. Presently, we introduce, practice, and display student writing skills within a one- to two-year time frame. Considering time limitations in the upper division, we asked introductory-level courses (Sociology 1, in particular, as it is a required course) to initiate discussions

with students about what an argumentative thesis is and what is citation and how to do it as well to remind them about revision and editing throughout the process of writing a paper. The intention is that by introducing these ideas early, it will help to facilitate the improvement of student writing when in the upper-division courses the ideas are needed. Furthermore, repeated reinforcement of these ideas is intended to help students to adopt the viewpoint of writing as a process and not an outcome (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982; Roberts 1993).

Thesis development. The introduction of what an argumentative thesis is and how to utilize it in a written assignment is first provided to our majors through an online link to an essay about what an argumentative thesis entails. Faculty then discuss what it is and what it entails for the required papers in each designated class. As identified before, faculty already require students to demonstrate the use of a thesis in their papers, so this newly designed and implemented information about a thesis was about explicitly introducing it to students as a component of writing. While the online essay was used by all instructors, the way that it was discussed and incorporated into the class varied by instructor so as not to infringe on his or her academic prerogative.

A couple of faculty members have attempted to have students practice at thesis development through verbal sharing. Students break into small groups (two to three students), and then they respond in the groups to a question asked by the faculty member. For example, in the Social Psychology course, a faculty member might ask, “Do you believe that the self is a core or situational self?” and then ask students to identify clearly their position and why they believe it. After discussing in groups, selected students share with the larger class, first articulating their explicit position, at which time the faculty member is able to critique the position that has been assumed by the group and, more importantly, give the students feedback about ways to more explicitly refine the position into an argumentative thesis. Then students can introduce their support for their positions (i.e., the supporting evidence), again allowing faculty members to reflect on the connection between the evidence and the thesis, giving feedback not just to specific students but to all students. Over the course of the semester, the questions or topics can expand beyond very specific questions that force students to take a position to more general questions that require students to discuss the introduced topic to determine a potential position they can assume. Practices such as these

need to be explicitly connected to the thesis development of their papers, linking the practices in class to the demonstration of using a thesis in the papers students write.

Revision. Revision is not directly related to any specific evaluated proficiency that composes the writing rubric but is a skill that faculty believe will aid students in being able to demonstrate their abilities in most, if not all, areas that are evaluated by the rubric. "Allowing students opportunities for revision is crucial if we want them to master the specific conventions and expectations of their chosen field" (Muldoon 2009:69). Our programmatic approach to promoting writing revision is that in each core class (again, except for statistics), students would have to revise at least one paper. Similarly, Burgess-Proctor et al. (2014) identified that the "craft" of writing includes revision, which they emphasized through peer review. Faculty are expected to introduce the use of revision and its importance in helping students with their writing. By requiring students to revise papers in a class, the students are simultaneously practicing their revision technique while also demonstrating their ability to do so. The engagement of revision is expected to aid students with enhancing their ability to demonstrate paper organization, highlight the need and use of evidence (which is expected to be further bolstered as students become more familiar with citation), and aid in the development of a solid thesis.

The skill was not solely about helping students to revise their papers but to socialize students to see it as a useful part of the writing process. To accomplish this, faculty used different forms of revision in the different core classes. Although the department agreed to incorporate revision as a practice throughout the core courses, each faculty member could implement this change in whatever manner he or she chose. Not only did this allow the instructor to teach this skill in a manner he or she desired, but it also had the effect of presenting to students a diversity of revision practices, rather than just one, which increases the options available to students (Edwards 2002). Aiding in our development of revision techniques, the Writing across the Curriculum coordinator on campus conducted a workshop for faculty in the department that relayed different forms of revision to use in class, each with an explanation addressing the ways to minimize the impact on faculty workload. As Ciabattari (2013) identified, relying on the resources and colleagues within the university can help advance the development of a writing culture. While a couple of the

faculty utilize a standard faculty review, return, and resubmit, others use peer review revision processes, and still others engage in what is termed an outline format that involves faculty, peers and/or the student himself or herself, who reads the paper and then outlines it, highlighting key points and the connection to the thesis. This outline should match the intention of the writer, informing the writer of a need to revise specific points. The overall intention is not to teach students one form of revision that they should use but, rather, to introduce and educate on the importance of revising, determining which form works best in their own writing process.

Citation. To introduce ASA citation, we created materials to be used in (ideally) all of our courses, including a sheet that highlights what citation is in sociology, why we do it, and the intention of it in our papers. Along with this are online links to the format of ASA citation and plagiarism, which highlight the issues that often derive from improper or inadequate citation. These materials were provided to all department faculty so that they can incorporate the collective goal of improving our students' citation related abilities, with minimal effort on their part. All core classes are required to present these materials to students, showering students with introductory information about citation. Furthermore, an example paragraph that identifies citations and why the citations were used emphasizes for students how it is done and why. These materials provide faculty with tools to help introduce citation information to students. Along with this, short assignments were created for faculty to use to help students practice basic levels of citation. Finally, and most important, ASA citation was required throughout all of our core classes, with each faculty member choosing how to introduce, practice, and require students to demonstrate the skill in whatever format he or she believed fit the course; however, most incorporated the materials that were identified above. Some used the given materials (mostly in the introductory-level courses); others designed class assignments that had students engage citation skills and produce it. For example, one faculty member had students review the online links on thesis and plagiarism, then write about the information in the links in a short paragraph, correctly citing the pages to support the summary.

CONCLUSION

What we have attempted to display throughout this article is the manner through which faculty in a large sociology department can engage in a

comprehensive assessment of student writing and respond programmatically with the intention of aiding students in enhancing their writing. Having just implemented the changes, we are unaware of the impact on student writing and, ultimately, as found in past research, if there is a marked change in student understanding of key concepts in sociology along with development of greater critical thinking skills. What we have presented is that it is an important endeavor that can be done feasibly, even in a larger department, and really something departments should be engaging in if they have identified written communication as a learning outcome for the program. While much of the assessment was guided by interested faculty, the assessment and the subsequent implementation of findings was departmentwide, integrated throughout the curriculum. Assessment is often entered into reluctantly, as a task to appease administrators, but by taking departmental ownership of assessment with a shared goal of improving our students'

writing, we were able to get buy-in from all of the faculty. The implementation of this assessment was supported by a university-required program review. By using a department requirement, we evaluated a regularly identified need within our program, thus addressing both the program review and the concern over student writing at one time. Furthermore, if our efforts result in improved writing by our students, this will benefit the faculty as well by reducing time spent editing and responding to student writing. While it appears to impinge on faculty autonomy, the impact was minimal, as faculty were still allowed to choose how each requirement was implemented as well as were involved in the decision of how and where to implement requirements. Regardless, the requirements would ultimately assist faculty if students develop their writing early and consistently throughout the program. Finally, we have attempted to convey that it is feasible to engage in this process without overburdening faculty.

APPENDIX

Sociology Writing Rubric.

Area	4 = Exceed Expectation	3 = Meet Expectation	2 = Approach Expectation	1 = Below Expectation
Purpose/thesis	An explicit and focused idea/thesis that organizes and controls the development of the paper. The paper is extremely focused throughout, addressing complex ideas.	A clear idea/thesis guides the development of the composition. While there is a clear thesis/argument, it is too general or too simple of a position (not a difficult position to assume/defend).	The student generally stays on a fairly broad topic but has not developed a specific and clear argument/idea. The writer demonstrates some understanding of the subject but has not yet focused the topic past the obvious and general, often descriptive.	The paper has no clear sense of purpose or central idea/thesis. The topic is identified but is discussed in a general sense.
Overall organization	The organization enhances and showcases the central theme. The order, structure, or presentation of information is compelling and smoothly moves the reader through the text, using transitions to connect ideas.	The organizational structures are strong enough to display a central theme and adequately move the reader through the text.	The organizational structures are not strong enough to display a central theme. There is a limited connection between ideas, much less paragraphs. Introduction and conclusion are not strongly related.	The composition lacks a clear sense of direction and identifiable internal structure. Little to no connection across paragraphs and within paragraphs, which makes it hard for the reader to understand the central theme or the main idea.
Grammar/mechanics/spelling	The student demonstrates mastery of standard writing conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, paragraphing) and uses these conventions to enhance readability.	The student demonstrates an adequate grasp of standard writing conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, paragraphing) despite a few errors.	The student shows a reasonable control over limited range of standard writing conventions. Conventions are sometimes handled well; at other times, errors distract readability.	The student demonstrates little control of grammar, syntax, and mechanics. The errors distract the reader and make the text hard to read.

(continued)

APPENDIX (CONTINUED)

Area	4 = Exceed Expectation	3 = Meet Expectation	2 = Approach Expectation	1 = Below Expectation
Evidence	Relevant evidence is used to support claims and explain how each relates without offering opinions. It is used throughout the paper to support each claim and the larger thesis.	Student uses evidence in parts to support ideas or relies heavily on one source. Evidence is not always connected to larger thesis.	There is limited use of sources or an overview of sources/ quotes with no analysis of the examples/ quotes.	There is almost no use of sources to support ideas.
Summary: Clarity and revision	The whole paper is extremely clear and easy to understand. It needs little or no revision.	The paper is clear and easy to understand but needs some revision.	Some parts of the paper are clear, but others are hard to follow. The paper needs a fair amount of revision.	The paper is not clear and therefore difficult to follow. The paper needs significant revision.
Citation of ASA format	ASA citation is correctly used throughout the paper.	ASA citation is correctly used throughout most of the paper.	ASA citation is correctly used in some parts of the paper.	Errors occur everywhere when using ASA format.

Note: A score of 0, or the absence of an area, was a possible score that could be given. ASA = American Sociological Association.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Teresa Ciabattari, Mark Edwards, and Kenneth Kolb.

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