

“Writing wasn’t really stressed, accurate historical analysis was stressed”: Student Perceptions of In-Class Writing in the Inverted, General Education, University History Survey Course

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TAKING INTRODUCTORY HISTORY COURSES and writing analytical essays are not the favorite activities of most first-year university students. Undergraduates, seemingly, would rather enroll in classes that pertain only to their majors or job-preparation regimen. If forced to take General Education Program (GEP) courses, students typically favor those with fewer required assignments, especially in terms of writing. To many first- or second-year undergraduates, English/Writing and Rhetoric courses are onerous enough—why would anyone willingly take classes in a different field that call for additional formal writing? Consequently, an introductory History course that requires more writing assignments than other GEP courses is an option few students will select.

Or will they? Though many instructors at the university level believe the above to be true (and have much anecdotal evidence to substantiate these claims), are such student attitudes the unchangeable norm? Do undergraduates not value writing exercises in courses outside of English/Writing and Rhetoric courses? Do they see writing only as an end product and not as a way to learn content itself? Is there a way to help students understand the value of a History GEP course that utilizes extensive writing assignments on a consistent basis? How can instructors address

these issues and promote different student perspectives on History GEP courses that are writing intensive?

The following essay attempts to provide answers by examining the synthesis of Writing Across Curriculum (WAC) and Inverted Classroom (also known as Flipped Classroom) techniques in two History GEP sections I taught at the University of Central Florida during Spring semester 2013. Both sections required extensive writing assignments in various forms as a means of learning History content. Both sections also revealed interesting student perspectives on university instruction and its applications. The data used to evaluate the effectiveness of WAC-Inverted techniques in these courses comes primarily from an IRB-approved student survey administered at the conclusion of the semester. Rather than advocate or discourage instructor utilization of the strategies used in these classes, the purpose of this study is to evaluate student understandings of History GEP courses, as well as student attitudes toward formal writing in such courses, to better determine instructor-student disconnects regarding course assignments and learning objectives. Readers may draw multiple conclusions from the information provided, but all should benefit from a close examination of the techniques implemented and of how students perceived both the strategies and the results.

Literature Overview

History instructors have grappled with the challenges of incorporating writing assignments into introductory college and university classes since the advent of higher education institutions. Student enthusiasm and preparation for writing-intensive courses have always been inconsistent and difficult to deal with in terms of course design and expectations. Other factors have presented obstacles as well. Increasing enrollments and expansive course capacity limits have eroded writing options in a practical sense, and inconsistent support in the form of grading assistants complicates both the types of assignments offered and the ability of instructors to directly engage students in writing improvement exercises. State and institutional curriculum mandates play determining factors in the scope and prevalence of writing assignments as well. Though technological innovations and the growth of online course instruction have facilitated more options for students to complete writing assignments and gain assistance in their writing-related questions, both developments have also presented their own problems related to student engagement, plagiarism, and accountability. Consequently, despite over a century of efforts to devise the optimal GEP course-writing assignment formula, consensus on assignments, strategies, or objectives remains elusive today.¹

In contrast, researchers have produced relatively little scholarship in reference to the utility of inverted classroom approaches at the college or university level. Primary and secondary school teachers have studied “flipped” classrooms for at least a decade, but college and university instructors have only begun to test such models in their classrooms in recent years. While inverted strategies in institutions of higher education may show promise, qualitative and quantitative evidence is still lacking. This is especially the case regarding the teaching of History. Instructors at the post-secondary level have largely left application of the practice to their counterparts in the sciences or related disciplines. As a result, the utility of inverted classroom methodology in post-secondary History courses is largely unknown at this point.²

Better known are the objectives and impact of WAC initiatives. Most advocates emphasize the concept of “writing to learn”—an approach to assignments in courses of all disciplines that encourages multiple student writing activities designed to promote learning of subject-area concepts and instill broader critical thinking skills. Proponents of WAC argue that students should not just write about the subject matter they are learning, but also write to better learn the subject matter. Accordingly, instructors design and coordinate writing assignments in a manner that encourages students to conceptualize writing as learning, thereby providing them with an additional means of facilitating their education. In other words, “when students are given frequent and structured opportunities to practice writing, they become more engaged with their learning, think more critically, and communicate more effectively. They are also better able to transfer knowledge and skills between courses and contexts.”³

Traditional vs. Inverted Course Overview

Traditionally, History GEP course instructors have relied on the lecture-exam model to convey information and evaluate their students’ understanding of content. For over a decade, I too relied on this model, with certain deviations over the years. Lectures served as the centerpiece of my course instruction. Though I often interspersed student questions and impromptu discussions into these lectures, I delivered the bulk of course content through formal lectures supplemented by assigned readings from a core text. Evaluation of student comprehension of History content took the form of non-comprehensive exams administered every five to six weeks, comprised of short-answer identifications (one paragraph) and one essay component (three to six bluebook pages). Writing assignments for these courses varied over the years; some consisted of evaluations of primary documents, others took the form of historiographic debate analysis papers,

a few involved compare and contrast assessments of different portals for obtaining information on the past. Student grades wholly depended on their understanding of content (based on exams) and ability to analyze themes or processes via their outside-of-class writing assignments (usually two over the course of the semester).

The inverted classroom structure I used in my two Spring 2013 AMH 2020: U.S. History, 1877-present sections looked quite different. Both sections consisted of fifty-minute classes three days a week (MWF). Deviating from past practices, I delivered no formal, pre-packaged lectures in these courses. Instead, I utilized two fifty-minute sections most weeks for in-class discussion of content based on chapters in the assigned core text. The first class period devoted to each chapter/section consisted of what I labeled “Before and After” discussions. In these meetings, I would attempt to equip students with context for understanding the topic of the week by providing information on what chronologically took place in preceding and following years (usually decades) while prompting them to add their own perspectives and question my conclusions. The next class period consisted of a “Thematic” discussion of the relevant chapter/section. In these class meetings, I would provide three key themes of the period and two examples of evidence to justify each of my claims. I then encouraged students to critique my arguments, offer additional themes and evidence, and relate our discussion to information discussed in the “Before and After” meetings. The final class session devoted to a particular section would consist of student application of what they had learned in the previous sessions through in-class writing assignments.⁴

In terms of student assessment, my inverted class structure deviated significantly from the traditional assessment I had used in previous courses with similar content. Of special note, students took no formal exams. Instead, I assigned a combination of online, in-class, and out-of-class assignments designed to progressively encourage student content retention while improving their overall research and writing abilities. To gauge student understanding of basic content covered in the designated chapters, I assigned eleven multiple-choice “ten questions in ten minutes” objective quizzes over the course of the semester, for which students had a three-day window to complete online. Students also had to demonstrate their interpretive ability related to historical content on eleven occasions through in-class writing assignments, as noted above. In each of these sessions, students would have fifty minutes to address an essay prompt according to the following template: “Based on class discussions and assigned readings, write an essay in which you address the Origins, Themes, and Legacies of *X*” (“*X*” being the topic covered in that section and discussed during the previous two class meetings). Students could bring any resources to class

to help them write these essays (textbooks, notes, online resources), but could not simply transcribe an essay written outside of class. During these writing sessions, I encouraged students to ask me any questions regarding content or writing. The goal of these writing assignments was not to test student retention of specific content, but to foster their skills in applying historical interpretations in a written format.

I also required both low-stakes and high-stakes writing assignments out of class to supplement online quizzes and in-class writing exercises. Both types of out-of-class assignments centered on an online compilation of resources familiar to many historians, *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* at www.slavevoyages.org. This site provided opportunities for my students to learn about the process of historical research and writing via assignments created to progressively improve their capabilities. I devoted three weeks of the semester to these assignments, again, dividing student tasks into three components. On the first day, students did not meet in the classroom, but were encouraged to schedule individual appointments with me to discuss the assignment. For each week of content devoted to the database, I required students to post a 250-word synopsis of the resources they viewed (depending on the week, these consisted of essays, images, statistics, maps, or timelines on the site), as well as their personal perspectives on the utility of those resources to an online discussion forum in which fellow students could post responses to others' assessments and question each other about the database's features. During the next class session, I would collectively discuss the online postings and, with student input, navigate the database site so that they would better understand the tools at their disposal and my expectations for the final out-of-class writing assignment for the section. This final assignment required students to write a three- to five-page formal paper along the lines of their discussion forum in which they properly cited the materials they used. Again, depending on the week, this paper could be a summary of a secondary source, a compare-and-contrast analysis of two primary sources, or a response to an interpretive question using three forms of database evidence on which to base their arguments. Students would not be required to attend class in order to research and write these papers, which they submitted electronically.

Grade Distribution and Student Perceptions

In terms of final student grades, differences are evident between the courses taught in the two formats, though the role played by the contrasting models in precipitating the differences is unclear. In my two Spring 2012 AMH 2020 course sections, the average student score for both sections

combined (106 students) was 74.1. In my two Spring 2013 AMH 2020 course sections, the average student score for both sections combined (107 students) was 79.7. Though the numerical difference between the two groups was only 5.6 points, according to the GPA guidelines established for these courses, the Spring 2012 average equated to a grade of “C” while the Spring 2013 average equated to a “B”—a determination students would find especially significant. Once again, however, the various differences in both groups related to a host of pedagogical issues, making these numbers useful primarily in an anecdotal sense.

Another tool for interpreting overall student learning of content in these courses came in the form of Pre- and Post-Tests administered to enrolled students. Inspired by legislative agendas and departmental efforts to evaluate student grades in relation to learning objectives, these twelve-question quizzes are made available to students online during the first and last two weeks of each semester. Course instructors have no role in the design or grading of these tests, and students are not required to take them (though they are strongly encouraged by university officials). Therefore, several students who completed the course did not take either or both of the tests.

Nevertheless, a total of 80 students from the inverted course sections did complete both tests. Though difficult to assess for multiple reasons, students in both sections combined answered 522 questions correctly in the Pre-Test, and 639 questions correctly in the Post-Test. Based on the number of questions asked overall, 960, students taking the Pre-Test collectively answered 54% of the questions correctly, while students taking the Post-Test collectively answered 67% of the questions correctly. These percentages may cause concerns overall in terms of student history content knowledge, both before and after the courses’ conclusion. Regardless, they do indicate that student knowledge increased over the duration of the course by 13% on average. Unfortunately, data pertaining to Pre- and Post-Test aggregate scores from previous semesters is unavailable at this time.

I obtained more specific information on student perceptions of writing assignments in these courses from the IRB-approved survey administered to students taking the inverted course sections at the conclusion of the semester. In this survey, administered by a colleague with no direct connection to the courses taught and for which students had the option of completing for extra credit points, students were instructed to respond to thirty-two questions (six of which required a written answer, with the remainder consisting of multiple-choice responses) addressing instructional techniques, required assignments, and student engagement. Specific questions addressed effectiveness of the course in terms of student learning of history content and student improvement in writing (informal and

formal). Out of the two course sections taught using the inverted schema, 85 students participated in the survey, though not all surveyed responded to every question (for unknown reasons), making the number of responses inconsistent.

Of the thirty-two questions on the survey, several pertained specifically to student perceptions of the writing assignments in the course. In response to the question, “Do you feel that the in-class essay assignments improved your understanding of course content?”, 81 students (96.4%) answered “Yes” while 3 (3.6%) answered “No”. The following question addressed student writing improvement specifically. In response to the question, “Do you feel that the out-of-class essay assignments improved your writing skills?”, 74 students (88.1%) answered “Yes” while 10 (11.9%) responded “No”. These responses are notable not just because the students saw in class writing assignments as effective in terms of learning content and improving writing, but also because of the sizeable percentage of students holding these opinions.

Other questions sought greater insight into these issues. One stated, “What was the least effective assignment category in terms of your learning of history content?” Presented with four response options, 42 (51.2%) answered “Out-of-class discussion postings”; 28 (34.1%) answered “Out-of-class essays”; 12 (14.6%) answered “Online quizzes”; and zero answered “In-class discussions” and “In-class essays”. The next question emphasized student perceptions of writing in a similar manner. When asked, “What was the least effective assignment category in terms of improving your writing?”, 43 students (51.8%) responded “Out-of-class discussion postings”; 26 (31.3%) responded “In-class discussions”; 10 (12%) responded “Out-of-class essays”; and 4 (4.8%) responded “In-class essays”. Another question sought student impressions of course writing assignments in another way: “What was the most effective assignment category in terms of improving your writing?” In response, 63 students (74.1%) selected “In-class essays”; 12 (14.1%) selected “Out-of-class essays”; 7 (8.2%) selected “In-class discussions”; and 3 (3.5%) selected “Out-of-class discussion postings”. According to their responses to these questions, students believed that in-class writing assignments played a significant role in what they learned in the course overall.

Some questions attempted to illicit student opinions of both inverted classroom techniques and in-class writing assignments in their overall learning experience in this course. When asked, “In terms of writing assignments overall, how does this course compare to other courses you have taken at UCF?”, zero answered “This course required less writing than other courses I have taken at UCF”; 7 (8.4%) answered “This course required the same amount of writing as other courses I have taken at UCF”;

and 76 (91.6%) answered “This course required more writing than other courses I have taken at UCF”. Yet, in response to the question, “If you had the choice, would you prefer taking other history courses designed like this course or would you prefer taking history courses with an emphasis on lectures and in-class exams?”, 10 (11.9%) responded “I would prefer taking other history courses with an emphasis on lectures and in-class exams” while 74 (88.1%) responded “I would prefer taking other history courses designed like this course.” Other question responses seemed to confirm student appreciation of inverted structures and intensive in-class writing exercises. When asked, “How would you characterize your knowledge of U.S. History (1877-present) after taking this course?”, 6 (7.2%) answered “The same as before I took the course” and 77 (92.8%) answered “Better than before I took the course.” More revealing, in response to the question, “Do you believe you have learned more about history content and writing in this course than you would have learned in a course with more emphasis on lecture and in-class exams?”, 10 (11.9%) responded “No” whereas 74 (88.1%) responded “Yes”.

The survey also allowed students to respond in their own words to both the structure and writing requirements in the course. Some students had mixed views on their experience. In response to the question, “What are your opinions on the ways that writing was covered in this course?”, one wrote, “The in-class essays were difficult for me to finish but ultimately increased my skills as a writer.” Responding to the same question, another remarked, “Although tedious, it challenged me as a writer and encouraged me to use the UWC [University Writing Center].” Another commented that “There was a lot of writing” but admitted, “I liked it. If it wasn’t for the writing and online quizzes, I would have never have studied.” Other student responses to this question emphasized similar themes, though some provided more specifics. One student noted that the “intense amount of writing helped to improve my writing skills, especially in regards to time management.” Another stated that “The writing was similar to my writing classes but required more textual evidence than my own opinion.” Regarding course format, one student explained, “I liked that we wrote essays each week instead of taking major tests, it made me learn more about each module each week instead of cramming for a test.”

In response to the question, “Do you believe the writing exercises you completed in this course will benefit you in other UCF courses? Why or why not?”, similar themes surfaced. One student simply wrote, “I don’t feel like my writing has improved.” Another responded, “No, I am not a history major.” A third offered, “Maybe. I’m a business major, so writing in this format or this content isn’t particularly relevant in my opinion.” One’s chosen major seemed to have an impact on the writing exercises’ utility.

Another respondent commented, “Although my writing has improved it was never a strong point of mine. Being an engineering major my future at UCF is one filled with math and physics not history and writing (unless of course it’s a lab report).”

Other students placed greater value on the writing assignments in the course. Responding to the same question as those in the above paragraph, one enthusiastic student wrote, “Absolutely! I have written so much now that I feel like I will be able to structure essays for other classes better and write efficiently and effectively.” Another stated, “Yes,” and reasoned, “While not all classes require a brief overview of content like history does, some forms of writing such as summaries & [sic] analysis papers have overlapping qualities w/ [sic] history-based writing.” Similarly, one student opined, “Yes because the in class essays were timed so it required you to be organized before you start writing.” Along similar lines, another respondent explained, “Yes because it involved analysis & [sic] connecting ideas to make arguments which is the basis of any paper you write.” Some students connected course assignments to the content of their current and future academic endeavors. One stated, “Yes, I have more knowledge of history for the future and now know how to write a better and more effective essay.” Another added, “Yes, I do because writing is required in many courses and the more someone rights [sic] in different circumstances the better they become.” A third commented, “Yes the writing exercises I completed in this course will benefit me in my English [sic] classes. I could not write well under the pressure of being timed but after 11 essays of practice in this course I believe my planning has improved.” Some tied the writing exercises in the course to future graduate-level studies. One explained, “Yes. I am applying for a Masters program and research and writing will be very beneficial to me.”

As evidenced by the readability errors contained in student quotations above, the writing improvement exercises I implemented in my course sections did not resolve all student writing problems. But the information above indicates the promise of utilizing inverted course designs and intensive writing exercises to inspire or improve students’ scholarly abilities. Two final student comments reveal more insights. In response to the question, “What could the instructor do differently in this course to improve your writing skills?”, one student admitted, “I have not taken a history course that has improved my skills more than this one. Quite satisfying knowing I wrote so much over the semester, it was not bad at all.” In response to the question, “What are your opinions on the ways that writing was covered in this course?”, another student had a wholly different outlook, answering, “Writing wasn’t really stressed, accurate historical analysis was stressed.” From different perspectives, both students

realized one of my ultimate goals for the course: improving student writing as a means of better understanding History content and methodology in manner that did not alienate students.

The above information is not intended to persuade all instructors of History at the tertiary level to embrace inverted classroom or WAC strategies in their courses. Incorporating both strategies can be problematic, disruptive, and unsatisfying to some instructors and students. But incorporating aspects of both strategies may be useful in meeting course objectives in unexpected ways. My experiences teaching an inverted course with WAC-inspired intensive writing exercises proved valuable not just in better conveying content to students, but also in encouraging better transferable skills in terms of writing and analysis. Equally important, I also gained insight into student attitudes toward writing that disabused me of stereotypical assumptions and impressed upon me the sophisticated reasoning students bring to their academic life that many of us significantly underestimate.

Notes

1. For a sampling of literature centering on the issue of writing and introductory history courses, see Chauncey Monte-Sano, "Toward Disciplinary Writing in History: Preparing the Next Generation," *Perspectives on History* 50, no. 5 (May 2012) <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2012/1205/Pedagogy-Forum_Toward-Disciplinary-Writing-in-History.cfm>; Stuart Greene, "The Question of Authenticity: Teaching Writing in a First-Year College History of Science Class," *Research in the Teaching of English* 35, no. 4 (May 2001): 535-565; John Patrick Donnelly, "A Term Paper Project in Large Survey Courses," *The History Teacher* 22, no. 2 (February 1989): 117-124; Thomas Harbison and Luke Waltzer, "Towards Teaching the Introductory History Course, Digitally (Spring 2012 version)" in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press, Trinity College (CT) web-book edition, Spring 2012, <<http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu>>; James R. Lehning, "Writing About History and Writing in 'History,'" *The History Teacher* 26, no. 3 (May 1993): 339-349; Anita Brostoff and Barry K. Beyer, "An Approach to Integrating Writing into a History Course," *The Journal of Basic Writing* 2, no. 4 (Fall-Winter 1979): 36-52.

2. Assessments of the process at the college/university level include "Flipping the Classroom," Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, <<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/teaching-activities/flipping-the-classroom/>>; Dan Berrett, "How 'Flipping' the Classroom Can Improve the Traditional Lecture," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (19 February 2012), <<http://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Flipping-the-Classroom/130857>>; Maureen J. Lage, Glenn J. Platt, and Michael Treglia, "Inverting the Classroom: A Gateway to Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment," *The Journal of Economic Education* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 30-43; Steven Neshyba, "It's a

Flipping Revolution,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (4 April 2013), <<http://www.chronicle.com/article/Its-a-Flipping-Revolution/138259/>>; and Audrey Watters, “Top Ed-Tech Trends of 2012: The Flipped Classroom,” *Inside Higher Ed* (17 December 2012), <<http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/hack-higher-education/top-ed-tech-trends-2012-flipped-classroom>>. In relation to the teaching of History at the college/university level specifically, though with a MOOC emphasis, see Jeremy Adelman, “History a la MOOC,” *Perspectives on History* 51, no. 3 (March 2013), <<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2013/1303/History-a-%20la-MOOC.cfm>>.

3. See Daniel S. Murphree, “An Unexpected Bridge: The AHA Tuning Project and Writing Across the Curriculum,” *Perspectives on History* 51, no. 4 (April 2013), <<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2013/1304/An-Unexpected-Bridge.cfm>>. For information on WAC philosophies in general, see John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, second ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2011), 17-21. For information on the UCF WAC program specifically (including quotation), see “Writing Across the Curriculum: University of Central Florida,” <<http://wac.cah.ucf.edu>>.

4. A similar overview of this structure is available in Daniel S. Murphree, “Taking Ownership of the Past: Flipping the History Course as a Means of Increasing Student Engagement” in *Best Practices in Flipping the College Classroom*, ed. Melody Bowdon and Julee Waldrop (manuscript currently under consideration by Routledge).

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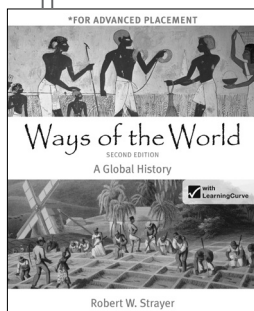
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