

"Engaging Students in Research and Writing: A Semester-Long, Multi-Stage Project to Cultivate Intentional Learners"

Fahima Aziz

Hamline University

faziz@hamline.edu

Educators and employers often emphasize the importance of college students' ability to communicate effectively both in oral and writing forms and to gain knowledge in methodology of research. In addition, problem solving, team- work, collaborative learning, and peer assessments are also emphasized in higher education and there are expectations that students would be able to acquire these skills in their college experiences. Enabling students to think critically is a core objective of a liberal arts education. Implementing writing or speaking intensive skills, collaborative learning, peer feedback and with critical thinking jointly in a curriculum can be a more meaningful educational experience than the pursuit of these goals separately. Students at Hamline University are expected to complete at least one course each year that focuses upon the written communication needs within each discipline. Labor Economics is an intermediate level elective course in the department of Management and Economics, which has a "writing intensive" component to fulfill the writing along with the disciplinary learning needs of a liberal arts education. A "writing intensive" course has three objectives: "(1) to designate specific written communication objectives appropriate to the course and the discipline; (2) to enable students to practice writing with guidance from the instructor, allowing feedback before the final product and building upon a student's writing strengths; and (3) to focus on the written communication process as well as the content. Students gain experience writing and receiving feedback from the instructor and/or peers to build their strengths in writing.

Most instructors would agree that such goals as stated above are worthy and useful in any educational experience, but they also have the first and foremost obligation to teach discipline specific material in core and elective courses in a semester-long time period. Trying to satisfy multitude of educational and instructive demands can at times be rather overwhelming, nonetheless an efficient pedagogical strategy would be to incorporate both goals, such that, learning content of the discipline and developing research skills and writing can co-exist and serve to complement each other. With this purpose in mind, I developed a multi staged research and writing assignment that would enable students to write (communicate) effectively without compromising the discipline-specific learning in my course. A critical factor in this process is that students receive feedback both from the instructor and peers at various stages of their writing. This multi staged writing process allows for appropriate intervention, assessment and modifications (fine tuning) of their work at various stages of the writing process. Peer evaluation promotes co-operative and collaborative learning, which are often cited as essential skills in both academics and workplace. Thus, an alliance of these pedagogical strategies along with students' involvement in the writing process have been cited as enhancing students' engagement and performance in a course.

This paper will illustrate a semester long assignment that allows students to write an in-depth research paper in economics, fulfilling the writing intensive component of the course, utilizing collaborative/cooperative learning with peer evaluation to enhance their critical thinking abilities. An assessment tool is also utilized to gauge student learning along with daily *Reflection Papers* before each class period, weekly *Learning Reflections* *Post Exam Reaction Journal* and *Knowledge Surveys* in the course. I find that an alliance

of these pedagogical strategies for cultivating intentional learners also enhances student engagement, learning, and writing performance.