

Zuzanna Koziatek

Professor Lardner

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Just Enough Freedom

Over the course of one semester as a tutor at the Cleveland State University Writing Center, I have encountered various students with various writing assignments. However, most of the students I tutored came to the Writing Center as part of their requirement for the ENG 100 Intensive College Writing class. Students enrolled in this class are often the ones that struggle with writing the most and therefore, they are required to visit us at least eight times throughout the semester. The typical ENG 100 course begins with a summary assignment, progresses to a rhetorical analysis, and ends with an argumentative synthesis.

This, of course, makes sense. First, students learn how to pinpoint “the gist” of a source, relaying the most important information in a concise format; in the meantime, they learn how to properly use the words of others. Then, the students move on to the dreaded rhetorical analysis in which in addition to finding “the gist” of a source, they must identify the purpose behind the writing, and the means through which the author communicates this purpose. In their rhetorical analyses, students must examine rhetorical appeals such as ethos, pathos, and logos and how effectively the author uses these appeals to achieve their purpose. In the final assignment, the argumentative synthesis, students must amalgamate their newly acquired skills to propose an argument of their own. Most of the argumentative syntheses I have read at the Writing Center first summarize each source, then move on to the “synthesis” portion where the author makes their own argument. In theory, the progression of the ENG 100 course at Cleveland State

University makes sense—students build upon their newly developed skills to engage in more and more sophisticated writing forms.

However, as a tutor at the Writing Center, I have time and time again stumbled upon some truly problematic essays—these are cases in which I’m not thoroughly sure the student or their professor knew what is happening in the paper. For instance, I had a student, let’s call her Lizzie, come in with a rhetorical analysis of a peer-reviewed sociological research study. The article she chose was objective, straightforward, and academic. From this information alone, one would expect Lizzie’s essay to be densely saturated with her analysis of the author’s many logical appeals. Most unfortunately, Lizzie’s essay did little more than analyze it for emotional appeals. The scarier part of this whole experience was that Lizzie’s professor gave the article the “initial okay” and Lizzie’s essay an A. Another ENG 100 student, let’s call him Matt, came in with three different nursing articles that were completely going over his head and mine too. I asked if there was any way that he could still choose other articles to summarize because paraphrasing these articles was not going so well (for him or for me). Matt replied that his professor already gave these articles the “initial okay” and it is too late. Perhaps the articles did not go over the professor’s head, but I think the professor should have realized the material is simply too difficult for him to write about. If the material was too difficult for me, how was I supposed to help Matt? I tried my best to help Matt with paraphrasing the tough material, but as far as his paper, I could only really tell him where the commas go; as you must by now imagine, I felt helpless.

Over the course of this past semester, I also tutored students who were obviously “buying their papers.” I knew based on having a conversation with them that their essays did not contain their original words. Most of those students who cheated were science majors who could care

less about writing a rhetorical analysis on an article dealing with the topic of writing itself or a summary of a random article about the Popeyes chicken sandwich craze... Okay, so maybe they liked the Popeyes chicken sandwich craze article, but it's quite possible that some students would have been more invested in writing the essays if they actually comprehended the material and if they liked it too. Then, I would get the students with awful science-related lab reports. Often, these students found themselves at the Writing Center just because their lab instructor found their writing so bad that they angrily marked the paper up with a red pen, then wrote "GO TO THE WRITING CENTER AND RESUBMIT." Seeing this remark on a student's paper, I felt absolutely disheartened as part of the lab instructor's job should be helping students write better lab reports. Interestingly, in *Clearing the Way*, Tom Romano expresses his desire for content-area teachers to have their students write. He shares this anecdote with us: "'It's not our job to teach writing,' a content-area teacher once said to me. And he was right. In fact, I don't particularly want content-area teachers doing much *teaching* of writing. That's mainly our baby, we English teachers who study writing, read writing, and write writing" (34). He seems to be correct here if we consider the case of the annoyed lab instructor: he undoubtedly scarred the kid. So then, where should students learn how to write about their disciplines? I tried locating writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) courses yet found that these are not as copiously offered in the scientific fields like biology, chemistry, and physics. "In spite of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement in higher education in the US since the early 1980s, there is little documentation of successful disciplinary writing curricula that are systematic in their approach, i.e. offering a sequence of writing assignments and instruction that explicitly move students progressively toward more complex and more expert writing performances as they pursue their major fields of study" (Beaufort 9). Therefore, it appears that the difficulty of teaching academic

writing to the most reluctant students falls on us writing teachers. How can we set these language-abhorring, science minded students up for success?

Altogether these experiences have made me ponder whether the ENG 100 course is the right fit for *all* students, and of course, people will say that it will only be as effective as students make it. Whereas the skills taught in the ENG 100 course are supposed to be transferrable to other disciplines and other writing forms, I have time and time again noticed that professors either give students too much or not enough freedom in their writing endeavors. Therefore, in this essay, I aim to demonstrate why universities should require introductory college writing professors to select the potential sources for student writing in advance. Otherwise, writing professors should not only “okay” any given source, they should read it thoroughly so that they are better equipped for giving students feedback.

When tutoring Lizzie with her rhetorical analysis, I could not help but think about facilitative and directive feedback. Her professor was unable to give her any other feedback, but the general “put the comma here” because the professor did not truly understand the content of Lizzie’s source. Whether this is apathy at its finest, incompetence, or something else, I’m not sure. All I do know is that Lizzie deserved better. C.H. Knoublach and Lil Brannon perceive directive feedback as a sure propellant for what Harris refers to as a “form of ventriloquism.” Undoubtedly, the stringent use of directive feedback has the potential to contaminate the student’s voice with the teacher’s voice. If we look at directive feedback through Harris’ lens, the student’s writing becomes something like the teacher’s puppet. Yet, the directive feedback Lizzie’s professor gave her was reduced to grammatical errors—perhaps content driven directive feedback in this case would have been better. At the very least, Lizzie would have been aware that there were indeed no emotional appeals in her source.

As opposed to directive feedback, facilitative feedback allows the writer to maintain control over their writing and continue the development of their voice; after all, this seems to be the point of teaching writing. The comments of a facilitative reader are designed to foster more critical thinking, more questions, more creativity, more understanding, and most importantly, less emphasis on the perfect product. These types of comments are just the opposite of what I had mentioned happens on so many poorly written lab reports. In essence, facilitative feedback encourages the recursive nature of writing itself. Instead of end-stopping the student with a plethora of directive feedback, facilitative comments spur the student to new meanings (128). Sadly, Lizzie's instructor was unable to give her proper directive or facilitative feedback regarding the content of the essay. If a professor does not read the sources that students choose, it is less likely they will have the ability to give students the best feedback they can for a summary, rhetorical analysis, or argumentative synthesis. When that is the case—when students write simply for the sake of writing *anything* if it fits the form—it feels as though students may as well write in their diaries all semester long. And although this could be wonderful, it promotes growth as a writer, it does not prepare students for writing in higher-level courses within their majors.

Whereas one may easily reduce the difference between directive and facilitative feedbacks to form and content responses, Knoublach and Brannon suggest that unlike directive feedback, facilitative commentary provides the writer with more options. It does not matter whether the facilitative comments come in the form of questions or statements—they still do not limit the potential actions the student will take when making revisions. For example, there is a significant difference between the directive question “Are there any transitions in your essay?” and the facilitative comment “At certain points in your essay, I felt thrown off by the appearance of new subject matter almost as if out of the blue. Sometimes, I wondered about the relationship

between all the topics you introduce.” The facilitative comment will lead the student to take a second look at their writing. Whether it’s a matter of popping in a few transitional phrases or linking the content back to the thesis statement, etc., the student will be given the chance to make the decision on their own accord (129). Facilitative feedback as opposed to directive feedback allows students to make new assertions, but if the professors do not understand the content of the students’ essays, giving facilitative feedback may be next to impossible. It seems that some students that choose to write about difficult, science-related content in the introductory writing courses are often robbed of that meaningful facilitative feedback, robbed of the possibility of acquiring new writing skills and new knowledge as well. It is important to note that the vast freedom students receive in introductory college writing classes may be too much to handle. As Knoublach and Brannon point out,

The consequence for a writer, in the absence of some control, might be either an aimlessness derived from the unresisted temptation to sample diverse possibilities at random, or more seriously, frustration and even paralysis in the face of so many alternatives. Writing teachers recognize these consequences in the rambling, disjointed efforts of some students and in the writer’s block of others. (69)

It is quite possible that this is where the issue lies for so many of the ENG 100 students I have tutored—this was certainly the case for Lizzie and Matt. Lizzie chose to write a rhetorical analysis of a sociological study, uncorrected by the professor in her pursuit of pathos in the source. Matt chose all those ridiculously tough nursing articles which were “okayed” by the professor. Another student I tutored, let’s call her Anna, came to me with a history paper that did not follow the assigned prompt—the essay lacked focus, development, and organization. I was not too surprised when Anna came back with a very similar essay for her argumentative

synthesis. Long story short, the essay was just as much of a mess as the initial history paper, but I still linger on to the hope our tutorial helped her get to better sources and a clearer argument. It appears that Anna was given too much freedom in her ENG 100 course. Perhaps, the professors did not even have the time to read through their students' sources, merely checking that the students did not in fact choose to write about some "fraudulent" blog off the web, which by the way, that was one of Anna's sources. Therefore, in addition to or instead of the creation of a separate introductory college course more focused on scientific or even technical writing, introductory college course professors should be held liable for the creation of specific prompts with already selected sources for these prompts. That way, the professors will be able to read each source thoroughly and the students will have freedom without feeling too limited.

Professors could present students with various prompts that would attempt to satisfy the interests of all students in the classroom. Impossible? Maybe. But it seems that compromise is key here. Of course, this will not teach students how to successfully find sources on their own, yet I believe that if the professors were more familiar with the students' sources, it would lead them to the provision of better facilitative feedback. In turn, this would arguably save time between each consecutive draft and thus, leave some course time for developing research skills.

From what I have noticed, essay topics are often too limited by the instructors or students are given far too much freedom in their source and topic selections. In Tom Romano's *Clearing the Way*, he is all about giving students more freedom when it comes down to both form and creative writing. Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm in *Going with the Flow* focus on the correlation between competence and effort. In their study of what young men enjoy in the classroom, Smith and Wilhelm explain,

The importance of competence resonated with virtually all the boys in our study.

Interestingly, their areas of competence varied widely, ranging from hip-hop, gaming, and sports to making model cars, photography, and many other activities. But for virtually every boy in our study, competence was key. (4)

Moreover, this idea of competence impacted the boys negatively as they refused to pursue what they felt they underperformed at. Smith and Wilhelm further note,

The young men in our study tended to read to deepen existing areas of expertise rather than develop new interests ... They gravitated toward types of texts they felt competent with, often magazines and newspapers, and bemoaned the fact that school forced them to read texts by which they were overmatched. (6)

The two researchers assert that “frontloading,” or “helping students bring prior interests, experiences, and knowledge to bear on a new task,” may be the key to keeping students engaged (33). Therefore, a student who abhors English courses is unlikely to put forth much effort into writing an argumentative synthesis on the writing process.

Yet as we have seen with Matt and his super complex nursing articles, and as Knoblauch and Brannon envision, too much freedom of choice can be given in an introductory college course. How is one to summarize something they cannot comprehend? Another interesting case at the Writing Center was the instructor that gave students the option to summarize a song or movie. How does one objectively summarize a song like *Hurt* by Nine Inch Nails? Where does one draw the line for how detailed a summary of a movie should be? At one of my tutorials, I was sure that if Harry Potter had gone to the restroom sometime during the movie, this would have been included in the student’s essay. Freedom of choosing one’s own sources sounds beautiful in theory, but at the end of the day, students should be coming out of their mandatory

English courses ready to take on academic writing, and in just 3 months' worth of time, there is simply no time to waste.

In order to meet in the middle, on the first day of classes instructors should ask their students what it is they are most interested in and what they would like to write about. It may make more sense for the instructor to make a list of topics in advance and simply have each student circle one to two selections. For instance, the selections may include subjects like English, biology, popular culture, history, etc. In short, a wide range of potential topics. Based on the students' selections, the instructor could then come up with yet another list of possible articles that the students could choose from for the construction of their essays.

All of this will make introductory college courses easier on the students and easier on the professors. Students will have options but not too many and will be able to receive the facilitative feedback that we all undoubtedly crave. Professors, in turn, will not have to deal with an abundance of random articles based on whatever the students come up with in their research. Basically, it is easier for a professor to become familiar with, let's say, 20 articles than read a new article each time a student submits an essay. I believe this is the best compromise and certainly worth trying.

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