



Teaching Public Relations

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Using Cooperative Learning to Make Writing Masters of Public Relations Students

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For years, employers have complained that public relations graduates can't write and that students entering a profession where writing talents are crucial to their success are unprepared for their chosen career.

With this in mind, Jack Haberstroh, a Virginia Commonwealth University associate professor, asked 938 public relations professionals listed on PRSA's "Academy of Counselors" list to send him challenging writing assignments for public relations students. One hundred forty-two counselors sent what he asked for - and more. While the counselors were happy to share their assignments, they could not resist the opportunity to tell him what they thought about public relations graduates.

"I didn't expect all the comments about writing, and its importance as a basic public relations skill," said Haberstroh, who has taught mass communication writing courses for the past 24 years. "Simply put, they said, 'Public relations graduates can't write'" (22).

Steven Ward and Rick Seifert, professors at the University of Portland, also found in a 1990 study that "more and more mass media students are writing with imprecision, poor grammar, bad subject-verb agreement, passive verbs, haphazard punctuation, gruesome style, and even lousy spelling" (24).

Because I worked in public relations for nearly 10 years before I began teaching news and public relations writing courses, I have seen the problem from all angles and agree with the professionals: students need a strong mechanical foundation if they are going to build successful careers.

After editing innumerable student papers filled with fundamental errors, I also agree that many students can't write for mass communication professions. The question is - what are we educators going to do about it?

In an effort to answer that question, I called upon cooperative learning to redesign my writing courses - placing more emphasis on the basics: spelling, punctuation, grammar and Associated Press style. Cooperative learning techniques seemed appropriate since I also desired their benefits: "additional active learning; increased student self-esteem, a strong sense of individual responsibility and group responsibility; and cooperation among students" (Karre 2). I call the results "The Masters of Writing."

Establishing a Conducive Environment

The first step is to get students ready to write. Students in many public relations writing courses write nearly every time they attend class, and it is important that they have the proper mind set to do so. A cooperative learning exercise called "Good News" is an effective technique designed to clear the minds of students and help them begin class on a positive note (Karre 1).

This simple activity requires a rubber koosh or other soft ball and takes about five minutes. It has only two rules: if the ball is thrown to someone, he/she has to catch it - and then share a piece of "good news" with the class. Professors can begin the exercise by randomly throwing the ball out, trying to avoid selecting the same students every time. After that person catches the ball and shares news, he/she then throws it to someone else.

On a typical day, the ball is thrown to five or six people. If many people in the room seem to be having a bad day, the ball might be thrown to more people. Students' good news can be anything they want it to be.

For example, a student might say, "I got an A on an exam today," or "The sun is shining," or "Tomorrow is pay day" (pay days always make for good news), or "I really feel in the mood to write today," or "I found a parking space today" - and on many college campuses that will receive a round of applause.

The news can be anything that puts the class in a good mood and ready to write. Even if some students are having a bad day and have no good news of their own, their spirits often are lifted because of someone else's news.

Writing Challenges

The other part of "masters" focuses specifically on writing. The exercise originally was borrowed from the Toastmasters International public speaking group, and then modified for public speaking classes (Karre 5). It has survived one more adaptation for use in writing courses.

When students enter public relations writing courses, they often are encouraged to build on the writing skills they (hopefully) learned in earlier writing courses, while learning to write for public relations. Most students have taken at least the basic English composition course and newswriting before they tackle the writing for public relations course.

Even so, many students cannot resist the temptation to write for public relations as they would write for English composition. Instead of building on what they learned in newswriting, they regress to English composition - and lose the basics in the process.

For example, some students write press releases with formal and flowery introductions and conclusions - taking too long to get to the point, and losing the interest of the intended recipient in the process. They often admit to wanting to keep the "formal and flowers" because it gives them longer releases - breaking yet another rule in writing for public relations.

For the same reason, students often include redundancies in their writings. After all, they get more words out of "in the event of" than just plain "if." Will Strunk, author of *The Elements of Style*, says, "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts" (23). Roy Peter Clark, director of the Modern Media Institute's Writing Seminars, illustrates this point well with the following example: *"After a while, the sorrowful Jesus in a startling*

development wept for quite a while" (Ghiglione 37).

Beginning public relations writers also struggle with the Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual. Many fail to master it in newswriting, and have a difficult time understanding the importance of writing news releases or newspaper editorials in the proper form.

They're frustrated by even more rules, and different rules, than they are accustomed to. They don't want to have to look in there to see if they should use words or Arabic numerals to write a number. They find it time-consuming to turn to the "states" section to obtain the proper abbreviation. And they don't even know that they should look in their style books for the proper written form for a "6-year-old boy." To some, the Stylebook is just one more headache associated with writing for print.

Writing at the computer with a deadline also troubles beginners. Most students enter mass communication writing courses accustomed to writing their work out in longhand and later typing it on a computer - and having a week or two to complete the project. In most newswriting courses they learn to compose at the computer.

Then they enter writing for public relations and discover that they must not only produce quality writings at the computer, but they must do so with challenging assignments that require them to quickly, but thoroughly, think through a situation, reflect on the ramifications of what they will write, and seriously consider how their writings will be accepted by their publics, as well as their employer/client - all on a killer deadline.

Cooperative Learning

As students try to adapt to these and other changes, they frequently are lured away from the basics. They focus on the Stylebook and deadlines, paying less and less attention to grammar, punctuation, style and spelling. Many have never learned the basics in the first place.

The "Masters of Writing" is designed to help students learn the basics by focusing on one area at a time, while they work cooperatively in small groups.

At the beginning of each semester, students place themselves in groups of four. After the groups are formed, each member is appointed a "master" of spelling, punctuation, grammar or style. Groups must have one of each. Students then give the professor a list of group members with master appointments.

Each master is responsible for editing the work of other group members in their master area for at least three weeks. Then they rotate. By the end of the semester, every student has focused on all areas - and is thereby a "master" of them all.

For example, if Shelly is her group's master of spelling, she is charged with making sure that all words on all of her group members' papers are spelled correctly. If Johnny is the master of style, he must make sure that all of his group members have written their assignments according to the rules of AP style. To accomplish this, students meet outside of class and "round-robin" their papers until all have been edited by group members.

The process normally takes about 15 minutes. Group numbers can be higher or lower as long as they are large enough for students to get adequate feedback from other group members. For example, if a professor notices that student papers are wordy and unclear, a master of clarity and brevity can be added to the group. A master can be created for almost any writing deficiency.

To help students become expert masters, in-class activities that focus on each area can be administered. Students should also be encouraged to review helpful resources such as Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, Zinsser's *On Writing Well* and Kessler and McDonald's *When Words Collide*. Individual or small-group tutoring sessions and the university's writing center can also be helpful tools.

As stated earlier, many students enrolled in a public relations writing course write nearly every class period - and on a deadline. At the end of masters class, instead of collecting papers, the professor should sign his/her name to the bottom of each (so students cannot add what they did not complete by deadline) and return them to the owners.

Before the next class meeting, students meet in master groups, always using red ink (or any color different from the professor's) to make corrections on their group members' papers. Assessments can be implemented as appropriate. For example, a professor may start each master off with 100 points and subtract one point for every mistake missed throughout the semester. This method rewards careful masters and motivates others.

Benefits

I've discovered that, almost immediately, the "Masters of Writing" helps to achieve course objectives. It encourages additional active learning. Students spend three weeks working to improve their writing, while mastering their one assigned specific basic writing skill.

For example, when students do not know how to spell a word, they sometimes avoid using it. But if a student is a master of spelling and his/her group mate uses a word the master cannot spell, it forces the master to go to a dictionary and find the correct spelling - not just choose another word. And as expected, the more students study and practice to be effective masters, the more their own writing improves. Better masters make better writers.

The activities increase student self-esteem, individual responsibility and group responsibility. Students who help group mates by showing how something could have been written differently feel good about their efforts. Often - even though masters have very specific tasks - they go beyond what is required and help in other ways. If, for example, a master notices that a sentence is structured poorly and knows how it can be improved, he/she will offer suggestions to the owner.

The result is that both have now learned something and benefited from the activity. Students also feel a great sense of responsibility to the group. Because they are the only persons in the group who are masters of their assigned area, they feel heightened moral responsibility to attend group meetings and "be there" for group members - a valuable attribute for a future public relations professional who will undoubtedly be required to work with others on various tasks.

"The Masters of Writing" encourages cooperation among students - making them all better writers. It helps them to interact with group members as professional practitioners interact with clients or employers.

Stronger social skills are another benefit of the activities. Students must interact with their group members - being diplomatic and offering constructive criticism and suggestions for their classmates' work. It shows students flexibility. While editing the work of their group members, students are often amazed by the variety of writings created from the same situation or set of facts.

And finally, because the masters are correcting the mechanical errors (and students make fewer of them as they progress in the program), the professor is left with more time to concentrate on other areas of

students' writings, including helping them to position their employer/client in a positive light, write with their publics in mind, identify and begin with the most important information, or whatever else is needed.

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