

Finding an audience: Write a letter to the editor or government official

mcnrc

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Summary

Writing a letter can be a powerful advocacy tool. Students construct understanding of an issue of their choice by researching the various arguments for/against it. They also see how graphs and visual components are used in supporting arguments and create one for their letter. Their authentic audience is either a newspaper editor (and potentially readers of that newspaper) or a government official. In both cases, the student presents this assignment as part of his/her ePortfolio at the end of the semester to a group of student peers and faculty members. As part of the assignment, they are required to submit their letter to its respective audience. Metro assigns this project as part of its “Health and Social Policy” class, a class taken by students in their sophomore year.

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Practice Identifiers

Location

This practice occurs in a course offered by the Department of Health Education. It is also the final course of the two-year Metro Academy of Health pathway.

Scale

This practice occurs in all sections of a course.

High Impact Practices

This practice involves learning communities and writing intensive courses. It takes place in a linked course that is part of a two-year learning community. The course is also the third course that the cohorted students take as part of a scaffolded curriculum that helps students build their writing skills over several semesters.

Helping Students Advance Their Learning

Reflection as a form of Integrative Learning:

- Make connections within a course
- Make connections across disciplines
- Make connections among academic experiences, co-curricular & lived experiences



Reflection as Systematic and Disciplined form of Inquiry:

- A structured and scaffolded process
- Connecting their learning to Gen Ed or programmatic competencies

Reflection as Social Pedagogy:

- Sharing their ePortfolio w/ and getting comments from faculty
- Sharing & engaging in integrative ePortfolio commentary w/ other students
- Sharing their eP & getting comments from external groups



Description of Practice

Practice Step-by-Step

This assignment spans a few weeks: it begins with each student chooses an issue they feel passionate about and learns how to clearly and concisely define that issue and its scope. The student integrates evidence to support assertions. Students are asked to integrate research to make their argument more compelling.

The peer feedback typically is done in the classroom with printed copies of the letter. We may transition to conducting the feedback directly in the ePortfolio. Peer reviewers use the same rubric that the instructors use to grade the letters. The students are asked to identify one area they would like their peer reviewer to focus on when providing feedback. They are also asked to respond to a series of questions that relate directly to the letter. Once students complete their peer review process, they revise their letters for final draft submission.

Adaptations to consider:

Ask students to write a reflective piece on their experience writing the letter for a real audience. Incorporate graphs or charts into the letter as a way to practice math skills.

The Role of Social Pedagogy in Advancing Student Learning

Constructing knowledge and understanding. The student chooses an issue they feel passionate about and learns how to clearly and concisely define that issue and its scope to an audience who may not be as familiar with the topic. The student integrates evidence to support assertions and takes a strong stance. The process from topic development to publishing the letter takes a few weeks of the semester, and students are asked to integrate research to make their argument more compelling.

The communication of understanding. Students communicate their understanding of an issue and their perspective and opinion on it in a professional way. The ePortfolio serves as a place to archive this work, as well as showcase it at the end of the semester. Some students refer back to this assignment in later semesters. This assignment also will include a reflective statement on the student's ePortfolio, where they will discuss the process of writing the letter and how this type of writing differs as they are writing to a real audience.

Involving an audience. The audiences involved are peers, faculty, and either a newspaper editor (and sometimes the newspapers' readers) or a government official. Close interaction and feedback occurs during the peer feedback exercises. Students are asked to include thoughtful evidence of peer review and incorporation of peer feedback into the final letter. Students have said that it is exciting to see "real-life" application of their work. Some students' letters to the editor have been published and/or have gotten responses from government officials. In future administrations of this assignment, instructors will use the ePortfolio as a method to do peer review, so students can see drafts of their published work online, before they submit them to the intended audience.



The Role of Design Principles in Describing this Practice



Inquiry. This assignment gives them a chance to explore a topic that could make a difference in their community. They are pushing themselves and the readers of their letters to take a specific action. They are asking critical, deep questions in this exercise. One unique way that this assignment uses evidence is students often get responses to their letters. This, in itself, serves as a way to gauge the way the letter is written. It is not, however, the only way that we can gauge the effectiveness of this assignment. A close look at the portfolios along with the rubrics we use to grade them can give instructors a sense of the quality of the letters. We hope to do that closer look at the end of the semester, when we have time and space to examine them across classes and even across institutions.



Reflection. In this practice, students are able to connect what they have learned in the classroom (making an argument, supporting with evidence, summarizing clearly and concisely, using and displaying quantitative data to support an argument) with a real-life issue that is important to them and their community. They show personal growth in the sense that it is probably an issue they have thought about for some time, they are just now equipped with the skills to be able to articulate their thoughts and create a well-reasoned argument. They go through a systematic peer review process and incorporate the feedback into their final paper. As mentioned before, revised versions of this assignment will ask students to engage in a reflective writing exercise that will go on their ePortfolio, along with the assignment.

Integration. This project gives students an opportunity to apply what they learned throughout their time in college to a 'real life' assignment. They are able to pull together skills they have developed in various courses and lived experiences and apply it to a current problem they care deeply about. The authentic and potentially broad audience helps give this assignment meaning.

Evidence of Impact on the Student Learning Experience

Through informal student feedback, we hear that students appreciate a real-life application of their work. It's great to connect "homework" to making a difference in one's community. Informal feedback from faculty indicates that the quality of their writing typically improves when they are writing for a real-life audience. Plans to do more targeted, detailed analysis of student work are in progress.



Connections to other Sectors of the Catalyst

Professional Development

The professional development for faculty is a sustained seminar (year-long). The faculty members who designed and engaged in this practice are part of our 45-hour faculty learning community [professional development program]. This program focuses on pedagogy, curriculum integration, and ePortfolio practice.

Outcomes Assessment

This practice is not currently associated with formal outcomes assessment work outside of the class.

Technology

Students post this practice onto their eFolio account. Because the assignment is in their eFolio, it is easy for them to showcase this piece of work at the end of the semester. If the student keeps their eFolio public, instructors may be able to show other students in future cohorts their letter.

Scaling Up

This practice has not been formally involved in scaling up, but we include it in the assignments we showcase to students, faculty, and other stakeholders, as it is a good demonstration of the 'real-life' learning that happens in our program. Because we have had several students whose letters were published, the practice has helped build enthusiasm for our program among both students and faculty.

Supporting Documentation

Syllabus: [HED 450.03 Syllabus SFSU Final Spring 2012.doc](#)

Assignment: [letter to the editor assignment.doc](#)

Sample of work: [Student sample – Letter To The Editor \(Final Draft\).docx](#)

Conclusion

We believe that the most powerful aspect of this assignment is that students are able to see a real-life application of their work. It is an opportunity to study current issues that affect their communities and take action using the skills they've developed through their college experience. It is an empowering exercise, particularly when a student receives a response or gets published. We have also made a practice of posting published letters on the wall in our main office—the enthusiasm around this is contagious.