Fostering Persistence Through Relevant Writing Assignments

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Abstract: Broad access institutions, such as community colleges, struggle with losing nearly half of their students in the first two years. Composition courses are among the first-year courses uniquely positioned to help students persist. This article suggests three types of writing assignments that may help learners--particularly online learners--persist in their academic studies.

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According to the most recent data provided by the American Association of Community Colleges, which draws from the U. S. Department of Education (USDE) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), the country is seeing a continued decline in enrollment in two-year institutions, particularly among older students. Furthermore, the NSC completion rate for full-time students is only 55% (Juszkiewicz, 2016, p. 3). While first-year writing instructors are among the professionals with whom departing students come into contact routinely, there has been scant scholarship on what these instructors can do to help students persist; yet, composition instructors are increasingly being held accountable for the "drop rates" in their courses--in particular their online courses.

Composition programs are in an opportune position to contribute to student retention efforts. There is little research, however, on how composition pedagogy and content might affect persistence in actual practice, but it is clear that certain pedagogies may actually do more harm than good in terms of student persistence. In "Teaching About Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year' Composition as 'Introduction to Writing Studies,'" Downs and Wardle (2007) examine the deleterious effects that disconnected writing assignments can have on first-term students. They describe a returning student who had failed to persist due largely to his experience in a first-semester writing class, despite having "spent every day writing papers for my last job [I] never really took the time to think about what I was writing" (p. 565).

What provokes anxiety in composition students? The answer to that question is speculative, but Downs and Wardle cite numerous pedagogical problems including a lack of instructor training in writing studies, lack of textbooks that reflect current scholarship, and ongoing practices of using composition courses to weed out seemingly underprepared students (p. 574). Is first-year composition, a course well suited to help students persist, doing the opposite? When Hobson-Horton and Owens (2004) examined persistence data on two focus groups of underrepresented students, they concluded that making student assignments personally relevant and personally meaningful increases persistence (p. 101).

Can writing instructors craft course content in ways that help promote persistence? What would such content look like, and how would it be received by a discipline in which there is already little agreement around what should be taught, how it should be taught, and what comprises composition content in general? What should students in writing courses be writing about? Certainly, many students fall back on hackneyed topics (e. g., abortion, capital punishment, the legal drinking age) while others work on projects perhaps seemingly less opinion-oriented and more inquiry-based but still pulled from a list of topics provided by the instructor or the textbook. These topics form the tacit content of composition courses and are arguably of more interest to learners than the assigned readings, textbook chapters, and discussions of rhetorical conventions because these are the topics about which students conduct their research, reading, writing, and revision. Could these very topics enhance student persistence? Here, I situate the debate around content in relation to persistence, examine alternative approaches to traditional writing assignments, and suggest three types of writing assignment content that may help learners persist.

The Debate over Content

Donahue (2005) asserts that,

> Given the paucity of articles and books about "content" in composition
> studies these days, it would seem that it is something that we either do not

want to talk about or believe should not be talked about, or feel has been talked about to death. (p. 30)

However, the debate over the role of content in writing studies continues and is relevant to persistence. In 1957, Bowen penned "The Purpose and Content of Freshman English Composition," which spurred a series of similar articles focusing on what exactly should be taught in first-year composition. Bowen hints at many of the problems that still plague composition programs today: uninterested learners, untrained instructors, and haphazard content selections ranging from personal narratives and grammatical exercises to popular culture projects and literary criticism. The debate continued the following year, when Bailey (1958) expressed disdain for the relegation of composition studies to a "service course" and proposed that "we must assert that we are teachers of a subject matter and we must … take care to limit that subject matter rigidly" (p. 233).

This question was taken up again in 1965 at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) when participants asked, "Is Freshmen English a liberal arts course or a service course?" (Workshop Reports, p. 196). This desire for disciplinarity is well contrasted against the more diffused, interdisciplinary content-focus espoused in the 1980s by scholars such as Scheffler (1980), who described courses organized around thematic concepts, such as "creativity," with content instruction provided by experts from other fields and writing instruction taking a secondary place as a mere skill (p. 52).

The debate over content continues into the 21st century. In 2000 the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) adopted an outcomes statement that formally delineates learning outcomes without specifically directing the subject matter of writing assignments, and in 2011 the CWPA collaborated with National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Writing Project (NWP) to develop the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* that describes habits of mind and experiences with reading, writing, and critical thinking that are foundational to success. Thus, if these outcomes and habits of mind are of primary emphasis in instruction, essay topics, which may be at the epicenter of learning, are secondary and may be determined by the institution, program, instructor, or student. This provides an opportunity to shape writing assignments in ways conducive to student persistence.

While certain aspects of content are fixed (WPA outcomes, an emphasis on writing studies, rhetorical conventions, form, and content); others are flexible, including the topics students write about. This presents a golden opportunity: to help students select topics that will help them persist. Downs and Wardle argue for re-envisioning first-year composition in a way that "shifts the central goal from teaching academic writing to teaching realistic and useful conceptions of writing--perhaps the most significant of which would be that writing is neither basic nor universal but content- and context-contingent" (p. 558). Arguably the most context-dependent content for first-year composition is the transition into academic writing, research, and inquiry. Downs and Wardle recommend that course readings be focused on issues with which students have direct experience. They recommend texts focusing on purpose, process, and procedure and that may be supplemented with other texts that focus on students' overall first-year academic experiences and the topics of change, transition, and persistence itself.

In general, then, there are two types of content in writing courses. First, there is rhetorical content, described here as the writing studies approach. Second, there is writing assignment content, which is often student selected, thematic, or connected to other courses. The remainder of this article focuses on writing assignment content: the content about which students are researching, discussing, writing, and reviewing in their writing projects. Furthermore, as elaborated in the sections ahead, I assert that this content should help students not only with their writing, but also with their persistence through their postsecondary studies.

Alternative Writing Assignment Content

In his work on adult learning theory, Knowles (1984) emphasizes the importance of focusing adult learning experiences on learners' needs, interests, and lives (pp. 23-25). This is directly in line with what Downs and Wardle suggest when they write, "students learn to recognize the need for expert opinion and cite it where necessary, but they also learn to claim their own situational expertise and write from it as expert writers do" (p. 560). It is also consistent with designing first-year writing courses that address students' lived experiences. As Davis and Shadle (2000) note, alternative writing replaces student

apathy toward mode-based writing topics with "excitement in research and theory directed toward projects that linked their academic and personal lives" (pp. 432-433).

Davis and Shadle explore what they call alternative research writing, which draws on students' lived experiences; connects the personal, public, and academic; and crosses and combines genres. Davis and Shadle describe alternative research writing as "reaching beyond the disciplinary thinking, logos-dominated arguing, and nonexpressive writing we have come to call academic" by mixing "the personal and the public" (p. 422). Alternative research writing asks writers to use research to "explore and mediate personal conflicts, contradictions, and questions" related to "an issue or theme of collective concern" (p. 440). In this way, students are extending familiar topics, related to their personal experiences, into topics that may be of concern to their peers, community, or society at large, and conducting research to make these connections and answer critical questions. The final product that Davis and Shadle describe often requires students to "compose with a large range of strategies, genres, and media" such as "lab reports, case studies, news stories, position papers, take-home exams, and research proposals" (p. 418, p. 420). The relevant nature of alternative research, connected to students' lived experiences, may contribute to their persistence.

Asking students to select topics, as is common practice in first-year writing courses, poses a conundrum: complete student choice may foster individualized and isolated writing, limiting the social epistemic possibilities of invention, research, peer review, and revision. However, thematic courses may alienate those students uninterested in the topic, lacking in prior knowledge, or intimidated by writing about it. A balance can be struck. Writing instruction provides an opportune environment for students to produce individual projects while reflecting upon their common experiences as first-term students, such as transitioning into postsecondary studies; balancing work, family obligations, and studies; and finding or following a new path. As the writing course progresses, these dialogs about shared but unique experiences can morph into dialogs about topics progressively less focused on persistence and more focused on the nature of writing, such as locating and sharing resources, navigating new technologies, and collaborating on specific writing projects.

Participating in a dialog about their lived experiences, in particular their experiences as first-year students, allows them to reflect on how their experiences are similar or dissimilar to those of their peers, while co-constructing course content in authentic ways. Not only do students benefit from participating in an ongoing dialog and from collaborating on shared topics, they may also share research resources (Boynton, 2002, p. 302). For example, Reinheimer (2005) argues that students should move through their assignments together, and write about common topics, to fully leverage collaborative research, workshops, peer reviews, and revisions (p. 463).

Three Types of Alternate Assignment Content

What exactly should students write about? In this section, I offer three types of writing assignment content both accessible and relevant to first-year students, including writing about familiar topics, writing about digital literacy, and writing about transition and persistence.

Writing about the familiar. Writing about the familiar means more than writing a personal narrative; it means writing about family, community, and work--topics that, as Knowles suggests, are timely and relevant to students and help them approach scholarly inquiry based on their lived experience, not just their social or political views. Dubson (2006) notes that, by not encouraging familiar topics, we risk disenfranchising students: "Merely doing what they are told to do without any innate or internal interest in the work is going to prohibit or seriously compromise the kind of learning and growth that we want to encourage" (p. 101).

One of the most familiar topics, and potentially most beneficial to persistence, is family. Indeed, mattering, belonging, and support are critical to student success (Baker & Pomerantz, 2001; Corwin & Cintron, 2011; Maestas, Vaquera, & Muñoz-Zehr, 2007; Nora, 2004). Ideally, students should feel that they matter to their institutions, instructors, and peers, but learners may experience sufficient mattering if they sense emotional support from their family members and friends. Writing about these important relationships and the support that can be drawn from them can be a critical

first step in helping students identify social support networks they may later leverage during difficult times.

Rankins-Robertson, Cahill, Roen, and Glau (2010) explore the implications of writing about familiar topics, in particular family history, especially in basic writing classes, in which students may feel disconnected from both the institution and expectations around academic writing. Here, instructors

> can address students' "disconnect" by providing writing assignments that enable students to simultaneously affirm what they already know (e. g., by allowing students to write about topics of personal, civic, professional, or academic importance to them); engage them with a real, rather than an artificial audience; and encourage them to learn new processes (e. g., rhetorical analysis or using primary versus secondary research), genres, and media. (p. 60)

Rankins-Robertson (2010), who taught family history writing courses, notes that writing about the familiar helps learners feel more comfortable by connecting them with an essay genre that they likely have encountered previously (p. 86); is easily integrated into a larger sequence of research-based writing assignments (pp. 86-87); can be aligned to the WPA Outcomes Statement (p. 88); and demonstrates the connection of an individual to a family, community, and socio-historical context (p. 104). Furthermore, Rankins-Robertson describes family history writing as "multiwriting," stating, "Not only does family history writing engage students in multiple formats of research, but it is also multi-disciplinary, incorporates the use of multimodal composition, and spans multiple cultures" (p. 97).

Similarly, Davis and Shadle propose that students write about things that matter to their lives and incorporate research to understand the value of expert viewpoints, third-party research, and data, always within the context of their lived experience. Thus, students move from writing autobiographical pieces to "generative" ones that focus on "a new incarnation to grow into" (p. 434). This emphasis on things that matter can, in turn,

allow students to feel that their experiences have value while simultaneously encouraging learning that, as Knowles notes, is rooted in past experience.

Downs and Wardle also stress that when students write about something that they and their instructor know about, the instructor is more effectively able to help them than if students "had been researching stem cell research or the death penalty" and can therefore encourage the student to dig deeper based on their collective knowledge (p. 566). Because students are revealing, researching, and writing about similar topics, they can identify with each other's experiences and share research strategies and sources. Downs and Wardle write, "Developing a 'community map' of opinion helps students envision research and argument as community inquiry and identify gaps that their primary research can address" (p. 563). They recommend starting with questions (rather than topics), working through collaboration, and ending with presentations (the results of which may be very useful to other students also at risk of departure).

Writing about digital literacies. As every writing instructor knows, students enter their courses with varying levels of digital literacy. Therefore, it is beneficial for instructors to understand their students' digital backgrounds and for students themselves to reflect on their own digital experiences. Selfe and Hawisher (2004) write extensively about digital literacy narratives. In *Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States*, they examine how literary practices are shaped by race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and access to technology. They define technological literacies as "the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values associated with such practices--cultural, social, political, and educational" (p. 2). By writing digital literacy narratives, students evaluate their own personal histories and make connections from their earliest uses of technologies to their current feelings toward technologies, including their own affective response to their perceived self-efficacy.

Digital literacy narratives need not conclude in the past tense; rather, students may write about their future aspirations; mastery of courses; and advancement toward academic, workplace, and personal goals. Case studies conducted by Selfe and Hawisher indicate that students overvalue the technical skills that they have cultivated over time

and undervalue those digital literacies taught on postsecondary campuses. They may, for instance, consider themselves proficient at editing videos, posting updates, and even producing websites, and feel that these skills are more pragmatic than the traditional essays required in courses. Here, instructors may find that they can leverage these skills to motivate digitally savvy learners to produce high quality digital artifacts and to motivate wary students to see the value in information and digital literacy. However, this starts by having students express their digital narratives and having instructors assess these to prescribe more useful instructional strategies. This approach is consistent with scholarship focused on digital literacy, multimodal writing, and digital historiography--all areas of innovation within rhetoric and composition (see Enoch & Gold, 2013; Ridolfo & Hart-Davidson, 2015).

Writing about transition and persistence. Nothing is more pertinent to first-term students than their transition to a new academic environment. As Corwin and Cintron (2011) write, "The freshman year is often deemed one of the greatest transition periods of a student's life with minimal parental involvement" (p. 25). By providing writing assignments that allow first-year learners to understand that they are in a state of transition, reflect on how their experiences are matching their expectations, and relate to their peers' similar circumstances, instructors can help students advance through their first year.

In his CCCC presentation *First-Year Composition and Retention: The Neglected Goal*, Griffith (1996) described a pedagogy in which he focused the content of assigned essays themselves on issues related to persistence. Griffith advanced a first-year composition curriculum in which writing assignments involved researching issues related to the transition from high school to college, the social history of college, and controversial college issues. His assignments are "designed with the idea that through them students would gradually feel that college experience was part of their identity, and that they had a stake as citizens in this new community" (p. 9). One intriguing part of Griffith's work is his focus on the transition from high school to college, as recent high school graduates are among those students who researchers have identified as at risk of attrition.

Similarly, Downs and Wardle suggest that students should be researching graduation trends; unemployment trends; the role of race, class, and gender; student debt; university programs; and career outlooks. They may also conduct research on their institution and its requirements, transfer institutions, degree completion requirements, employment opportunities, professional qualifications, enrollment practices, student borrowing and source of student aid, and support services available to them, their peers, or their family members. Finally, they may write about student success measures, such as study skills, time management, and tutoring. These topics involve legitimate research, address student-oriented concerns, lend themselves to peer collaboration, and promote affiliation among students, faculty, and staff at institutions.

Horner (2010) advises having students coauthor writing about "growth and change" with dialogic responses to other students (p. 21). For example, students might work on transition action plans, persistence plans, academic plans, and career plans. While many students are still determining their majors in the first year, others are enrolling after years in the workplace and may have very specific goals in mind. Encouraging students to focus on these goals in concrete, actionable, research-based ways allows them to explore things directly relevant to their careers and academic investments, such as career prospects, degree requirements, internship opportunities, funding sources, transfer credits, and even advanced degree programs. Not only are these relevant, but they also help students begin to construct the scaffolding for academic persistence.

In Summary

These three types of alternate writing assignments are consistent with the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (CWPA, NCTE & NWP, 2010), which states that writing assignments should be aimed at "genuine" audiences, including "teachers and other students to community groups, local or national officials, commercial interests, students' friends and relatives, and other potential readers" (p. 7). Writing about the familiar, writing about digital literacies, and writing about transition and persistence are all assignment topics that can be aimed at genuine audiences, whether those audiences include the instructor, fellow students, or the broader student body. The *Framework*

continues, "Teachers can help writers develop rhetorical knowledge by providing opportunities and guidance for students to … write for real audiences and purposes, and analyze a writer's choices in light of those audiences and purposes" (p. 10). Alternative writing assignments make this kind of writing and analysis much easier, both for students and for instructors, by fostering collaborative research and a shared dialog on topics relevant to learners.

Persistence is rarely discussed with those who are most at risk of departing: students. While institutions struggle to attract, place, and retain students, they do little to address the issue of persistence in a transparent manner. Learners may not realize that they are in a state of transition, that they can accomplish academic work, and that academic adjustment and integration takes sustained effort over time. If they realize that transition is a normal part of beginning postsecondary studies, they are more likely to understand their feelings, verbalize their concerns, and make persistence a personal goal. By understanding the debate around content, incorporating alternative approaches to research-driven content into writing courses, and encouraging students to write about topics that promote persistence, writing instructors can leverage disciplinary content with situated contexts and help students build successful persistence strategies.

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