
**Categories:** Writing, Metacognition, Active Learning, Student Centered Learning, Discussion

**Summary**

In this article the authors discuss a tool that they created to help students develop their writing skills. According to the authors the increased focus in higher education on writing across the curriculum has led to greater focus on how writing is taught, especially in non-English, writing intensive courses. Following this trend, the authors have tried a variety of tools to improve their students' writing including the use of rubrics, mandatory drafts and revisions, and scaffolded assignments. Despite using these tools, they felt that they need to do more in the area of writing instruction. In particular, they felt that their efforts had failed to help them in “establishing and maintaining an active, written dialogue with students about their writing process.”

In order to address this problem, the authors created a tool that they refer to as a process memo and employed it in their classes. The process memo presents students with a variety of questions pertaining to the entirety of the writing experience in their class. Different memos, with differing questions, were given to students for both initial and final drafts of their papers. On the initial draft process memo the questions focused on students’ prewriting techniques, the rubric and assignment provided by the professors, and what students liked about their draft as well as what they believed they need to improve upon. Those on the final draft process memo shifted focus to the students’ use of the feedback provided by the professors and the efforts that they made to improve their final draft. While students’ written responses to the process memos were not graded, the professors withheld grading students’ papers until the process memos had been turned in.

According to the authors the process memos facilitated writing improvement in several ways. First, and most obviously, the memos gave students an opportunity to engage in additional writing in a less formal, lower-stakes manner. In a less obvious sense, the process memos helped students to deal with their anxieties about writing by getting them to think about the underlying elements of the writing process and discussing it, in writing, with the instructors. Asking questions that focused on the nature of the assignments or the way that they posed questions, the rubrics, and other resources served as a particularly useful tool for helping those students new to or underprepared for college. Finally, by requiring students to think about the writing process and articulating their thoughts in writing, the process memo acted as a metacognitive exercise focused on the act of writing and increased the likelihood that students read the instructors’ feedback and incorporated it in their final drafts.

The rest of the article examined the authors’ employment of the process memos in their classes and the findings they arrived from studying their usage. The process memos were given to students in six different classes at two different institutions (one a small liberal arts college, the other a mid-sized private university). From the courses the authors received a total of 242 process memos, which represented a 92.4% return rate on first and final draft assignments. To analyze data they utilized a
“grounded theory approach,” which allowed them to identify the themes that commonly emerged in the memos.

In their initial analysis, the authors found significantly different themes emerging from the memos. This variance they ascribed to the different content and topics examined in their classes. In the second round of analysis they chose to focus the memos on questions pertaining to students’ perceptions of their own weaknesses, the feedback that they received from the instructors, the teaching tools utilized in the classes, and advice that they would offer to future students. After shifting to these topics, the authors identified several common themes in the submitted memos. One key finding was that two-thirds of the memos accurately identified the respective students’ particular weaknesses in their papers. The authors verified this by reading the students papers first and only then looking at their process memos. Importantly, a majority of students also noted that they were uncertain as to how to address or correct their particular weaknesses. This in turn helped the authors to offer feedback specifically tailored to address those weaknesses and to increase instruction geared towards improvement in these areas. Another common theme that emerged in the second round of process memo analysis noted that students had a generally positive towards the teaching tools employed in the classes and the resources available to them through their respective institutions. Finally, the process memos presented several shared points of advice for future students, including the need to use instructor feedback when writing final drafts and to effectively manage time.

Conclusions

Despite offering no evidence, the authors concluded that the use of process memos had helped their students become more effective writers. More convincingly, the authors also noted that employment of the process memos had helped them become more effective teachers by providing them with greater insight into the concerns and weaknesses of their students when it came to writing. The authors also argued that the process memo served as a useful device for engaging the students in thinking about their writing and in an ongoing dialogue with their instructors about the process of writing.

Applications

This article presents a straightforward description of a useful and adaptable tool for improving written communication. At first glance it might seem as if application of the process memo would be especially well suited in English courses. While this is certainly true, and may be already common knowledge among English professors, the authors are not in fact in the English field and devised the tool as a means of improving student writing in non-English classes. As such, the process memo is potentially useful to professors in any subject area who assign papers. The authors have also made adoption of the process memo even easier by providing complete samples within the body of the article, thus allowing anyone who is interested in adopting the tool to quickly and easily adapt it to their liking.

Citations of Interest


Lillis, Theresa and Joan Turner. 2001. "Student in Higher Education: Contemporary Confusion, Traditional Concerns." Teaching in Education