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Assignment Critique

“The Good, the Bad and the Ugly” assignment is designed to be an opening exercise to catalyze discussion into the nature of academic writing. As the assignment is written, students are given a passage from Walden and instructed to “make it” bad writing – or at least demonstrate *their* conceptions of bad writing. Ideally, students will become conscious of similar issues in their own writing by intentionally making mistakes.

When I wrote this assignment, I expected to receive finished products plagued primarily with grammar issues – spelling, verb tense, word usage. I anticipated that students would be less aware of the more global topics such as argument, structure, thesis, supporting evidence, clarity and relevance. After all, as we have discussed in class, politicians, parents and the general public herald “grammar” as a sort of talisman, as the backbone of what it means to write well.

The assignment might be considered a synthesis of Bartholomae and Elbow ideology. The primary intent is for students to become aware of Bartholomae’s conception of the writing of the academy – “pure, muscular, lean, taut, the language of truth and reason” or “a tool for inquiry and critique” (479-480). The conscious process of creating mistakes will help students to recognize writing that is NOT “pure” or “taut” or clear. However, the assignment also allows for a bit of creative license, which probably would please Elbow. Within the framework of inappropriateness, students can be as bad – or as ugly – as they desire, and explore different creative venues. In this way, both Bartholomae, and to a lesser extent, Elbow are represented in this assignment.

One of the problems with the assignment is that students probably will not create the mistakes that are prevalent in their own writing. In other words, if a student cannot identify an error, if he or she does not know it is wrong, then a student will be unlikely to reproduce it in this context.

I used this as an opening assignment for one of my ENGL 180 students. We discussed it in class, and therefore, at the time I did think it necessary to thoroughly explain the directions in print. I was mistaken. The resulting student work was an interesting hybrid of summary and critique: as if the student tried to recreate Thoreau’s argument using personal experience and opinion.

In theory, I think the assignment can catalyze an interesting discussion as well as student discovery. In practice, the assignment posed difficulties because the student was confused, and perhaps, did not have a clear understanding of the process (and desired products) employed in the expository writing classroom. Also, students are usually chastised for producing “bad writing” and making mistakes, and therefore, students may be hesitant to “write good.” Still, I think that once students begin, they may actually enjoy the license to make mistakes and may produce interesting, creative, unique and perhaps even humorous results!

Therefore, my first revision to this assignment would be to clarify and expand the directions. I even considered providing an example paragraph, but I decided that would

be counter-productive. An example would demonstrate *my* (the teacher's) ideas on bad writing instead of drawing from the thoughts of the students. Then, when writing the assignment, they would only replicate my errors in a new way with a new passage. So, the directions need to clarify the assignment in a way that will not betray the potential for discovery. Perhaps the directions can be revised as follows:

What is good writing? What elements are found in good writing? Or, what elements are NOT found in good writing? What determines the quality of a piece of writing? In other words, what distinguishes good writing from excellent writing? After considering these questions, "revise" the excerpt provided to demonstrate your concept of bad writing. (Maybe think of it as a what-not-to-do-in-academic-writing guide!)

In addition to rewriting the directions, I would probably change the context in which the assignment is used, from independent homework to in-class collaboration. Bruffee would probably agree that the students will come to realizations more quickly when working collaboratively. Also, if the students work together as a class to construct a piece of "bad writing," they collectively establish a standard for class work itself. When grading assignments, the instructor can then hold the class responsible to its own standards for academic writing. Also, the students can debate and prioritize the importance of grammar, thesis, argument, evidence and other elements of writing in class, and the instructor can always insert "leading" information. For example, an instructor might say, "What if I did xyz to this word, phrase, sentence, paragraph or paper?" In this manner, the assignment becomes a dialogue between classmates and the teacher.

Finally, I would replace the Thoreau excerpt with a paragraph of my own devising that imitates Bartholomae's concept of academic writing more closely. I would include a thesis statement, and focus on argument and supporting evidence. Additionally, I would consider the most common errors in writing (courtesy of Connors and Lunsford) and design my "good paragraph" to allow for those errors to appear in a reconstruction. Some of these common errors include confusion between it's/its, who/whom, and that/which; improper use of punctuation in the form of apostrophes, commas, colons and semi-colons; "vague pronoun reference;" and verb tense issues (338-339).

Bartholomae, David and Elbow, Peter. Cross-Talk in Comp Theory ed. Villanueva, Victor. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1997.

Connors, Robert and Lunsford, Andrea. "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing. 5th ed.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

This exercise is meant to be a fun exploration of the differences between good, mediocre, bad and horrible writing. Take the following excerpt and make it UGLY writing.

For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life -- I wrote this some years ago -- that were worth the postage. The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest.

And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter, -- we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea.