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Assignment Critique

Context and Overview

“Paper #3: Definition of a Problem Facing Cleveland’s Urban Population” was due during the ninth week of a first-year college composition course called “Identity and Community.” During the semester, students discussed social and economic problems that Cleveland’s population faces daily. To supplement class discussion students visited Cleveland School of the Arts numerous times during the semester to fulfill the service learning requirement for the class. This assignment was designed to encourage students to think back on the class discussions which centered on Cleveland problems as well as talk to the Cleveland School of the Arts’ students and reflect on problems that the students, their friends, or their families may encounter in their daily lives. Along with class discussion and interaction with Cleveland residents, the assignment requires students to complete outside research. The outside research encourages students to use statistics, data, quotations, and facts to more clearly define a problem in Cleveland. The assignment was completed in a two-draft process; the instructor held conferences with students after the first draft was completed. The instructor graded each draft. The first draft was graded according to a rubric that included the clearness of the thesis statement, the works cited page, the in-text citations, the reliability of the sources, and the page length. The second draft grade did not include a specific rubric for grading; instead, the draft was graded according to the instructor’s grading criteria for written work.

Theoretical Tradition

This assignment originates from the service learning pedagogy. This paper follows service learning scholar Thomas Deane’s model for writing-*about*-the-community. The students complete service learning during the course of the semester, and this paper is directly intended to introduce students to the idea of research *about* the community in which they are serving. During this research *about* the community, students are encouraged to interact with and learn from the people they are serving (the students at Cleveland School of the Arts) and gather research about the problem as well. Service learning pedagogy strives to enable students to learn about the community, better understand problems the community faces, and help develop or imagine solutions for these problems. This assignment helps the student to better understand the problems faced by the community members because it combines outside research with first-hand experience and knowledge of community problems.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Changes for the Assignment

Within a service learning classroom this assignment encourages students to use the information that they learn from the people for whom they provide service, which is one of the most important aspects of writing in a service learning classroom. Also, the assignment requires students to complete outside research to better define the problem they choose. This research should give students a more accurate impression of the problem they study. One critique of service learning pedagogy is the reliance solely on personal reflection. But, this assignment forces students to look outside of their reflections; they must combine hard evidence and facts with their own personal experience and anecdotes that they have heard. The assignment requires students to include details from “statistics, observations, or expert opinion” to clarify and back their claim that their topic really is a problem in Cleveland. This insistence on detail also helps

students to synthesize personal reflections (which oddly enough are not included in the assignment but students were encouraged to talk with the Cleveland School of the Arts students to discover different problems) and research. This combination of service and research should strengthen the papers that students write and keeps the paper from falling into the category of “personal reflections and anecdotes only” paper.

Overall, the assignment provides clear grading criteria for the students. The paper requirements are specific, and they should help the student to write the paper in a way that will be successful. However, the “objective” section of the assignment is vague. While this section gives students ways to approach the paper (focusing on a specific local problem or a national problem with local importance), it does not explain to the students how this paper fits into the class as a whole. The objective does not give the students a clear reason for the assignment, nor does it help students understand what skills they should strengthen and gain by completing this assignment. The instructor should provide students with this information; then, they will know what specific parts of the paper are particularly important. Also, the students are not told if the information gathered for this paper will be used for future assignments in the class. One aspect of “writing-*about*-the-community” writing in service learning is the idea that the writing will produce some sort of proposal for solutions to the problems faced. The last paper of the semester for this class is a proposal, and the information gathered for this paper will, more than likely, be used in that proposal. However, the objective does not mention this research being used in the future. If this fact were to be mentioned, the research completed may have been more specific and better thought out than what resulted in the students’ papers. Also, the objective does not adequately stress that the problems the students investigate should be narrow and specific. The objective for this assignment should clearly state that a specific narrow problem should be investigated, this information will be used in later papers, and research should focus on the specific problem. The objective should also encourage students to talk with the Cleveland School of the Arts’ students.

Assignment Results

The students in this first-year writing course completed the first draft successfully according to the rubric. Most of the papers had a thesis statement, followed the page limit guidelines, and contained in-text citations and a works cited page. However, the problems that the students focused on were very broad. They were not easily or well covered in a short definition of the problem, as this assignment was designed to be. For instance, instead of defining the problem of the high unemployment rate in Cleveland, the students instead defined poverty as a problem that Cleveland residents face. While poverty is a problem faced by Cleveland residents, there are many reasons for this poverty and these reasons are the more specific problems that the instructor desired. Also, these problems are more easily defined in three to four pages of text. Also, the students did not complete very thorough research investigations for their problems. Instead of investigating particular causes for unemployment, they simply consulted the census (to find the number of people in Cleveland living in poverty) and a newspaper article from *The Plain Dealer* discussing the poverty level in Cleveland; then, they stopped at those two sources. Even after conferencing with the instructor about ways to improve the paper, most students did not complete the necessary research or adequately define the problem to make it useful for later papers, such as the proposal assignment later in the semester.

Paper #3: Definition of a Problem Facing Cleveland's Urban Population

Objective:

After reading articles and conducting other research, define a problem facing a particular sector of Cleveland's urban community. You may choose to focus on a local problem that residents of a specific area must deal with, such as the closing of a local business. You may also discuss a national problem using local evidence; examples of these include poor welfare policies for the elderly, the lack of affordable housing for low-income families, or the decline of downtown consumer traffic.

Paper Requirements:

- 3-4 pages, not included Works Cited page, typed according to the Formatting Guidelines
- At least two reliable research sources, only one of which may be a website (an on-line article that first appeared in print may be the other)
- A thesis that clearly defines the problem in one sentence
- Details that illustrate the problem using statistics, observations, or expert opinion (either from interviews or outside sources)
- In-text citations for all sentences containing information from research
- A Works Cited page
- Precise word choice and thorough proofreading