

# A Collective Effort to Improve Sociology Students' Writing Skills

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## Abstract

Nationwide, academic sociologists at all types of higher education institutions face the challenge of working to improve students' writing skills. In this article, we describe a collective effort by a group of faculty members in one undergraduate sociology program to implement several effective writing-improvement strategies. We advocate aiming to improve students' writing by working together on a united front rather than working in isolation. After explaining the origins of the collective emphasis on writing that emerged in our group and briefly outlining the writing-improvement strategies that we utilize, we use student survey data to reflect on major themes before concluding with a discussion of the merits of our collective approach.

## Keywords

student writing, writing across curriculum, professionalization of students

As sociology professors, we have the opportunity to teach our students not only concepts and theories that will help them develop their sociological imaginations, but also effective writing skills that will benefit them in their working lives and post-university careers (see e.g., Hudd, Sardi, and Lopriore 2013). Indeed, these need not be separate endeavors, as strategies that promote coherent, logical, effective, and even elegant student writing can accomplish both aims. Good writing helps produce good critical thinking, so sociology instructors accomplish their tasks more effectively with an emphasis on written assessment. Just as importantly, good writing skills constitute an invaluable tool for students as they navigate their lived experiences after graduation.

This article emerges out of a collective effort by a group of five faculty members in one undergraduate sociology program to implement effective writing-improvement strategies for students. We begin by using the literature on teaching writing in sociology to situate the origin of our collective approach. We then describe how our group came together and

what we do in the classroom to improve our students' writing skills. At the heart of our discussion is our use of a student survey as a tool for assessing and improving our collective effort. We conclude by elaborating lessons learned from our endeavors and highlighting merits of our collective approach.

## TEACHING WRITING IN THE SOCIOLOGY CLASSROOM

Although an abundance of literature supports our core aim of improving students' comprehension through writing (e.g., Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003; Hudd and Bronson 2007; Roberts 1993), we believe our contribution advances these

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works by highlighting the collaborative nature of faculty in our department to institute the practices outlined in those works. Some prior research addresses related efforts but lacks our specific goals and strategies. A number of articles, for instance, describe the ways in which departments collectively have recognized a perceived challenge or need and the resulting work toward redressing that issue (e.g., Ciabattari 2013; Clark and Filinson 2011; Waltermaurer and Obach 2007). Schmid (1989) discusses his department's work to develop a mission statement and then draw on that statement to develop the curriculum. Shostak et al. (2010) describe their department's efforts to integrate research methods as a core focus in their curricula. In the smartly titled "Kicking and Screaming: How One Truculent Sociology Department Made Peace with Mandatory Assessment," Clark and Filinson (2011) narrate the obstacles and successes along the way to curricular self-assessment. Pittendrigh and Jobes (1984) describe how they emphasized the importance of writing in the sociology classroom, but their work took a team-teaching approach in which a writing instructor and a sociology instructor worked in tandem within one course at a time.

Two recent articles come particularly close in form to our contribution. First, Waltermaurer and Obach (2007) discuss their energies toward connecting multiple courses in the department via content and themes so that students can see better how sociology is a cohesive and coherent discipline. This piece, while significant for a variety of reasons, does not accomplish what we attempt to do: highlight the importance of implementing a collective effort to improve sociology students' writing skills. Second, Ciabattari (2013:61) describes a department-wide initiative to build "sequential writing competencies" into a sociology program. This approach involves identifying specific competencies that students at each course level (100-level, 200-level, etc.) should possess and working together to help students master these competencies. Compared to the effort described in Ciabattari (2013), ours involves a subgroup of faculty members within a larger, multidisciplinary department. Our approach emphasizes that a collective effort need not be a department-wide, institutionalized one. Indeed, faculty can still collaborate and students can still feel the impact of a concerted effort even if only a subgroup of like-minded faculty members participate. In addition, compared to Ciabattari's (2013) greater emphasis on student competencies, our approach elaborates more on the

actual writing-improvement strategies used in the classroom and provides insightful background on the formation of our group—to which we now turn.

## DEVELOPING A "CULTURE OF SOLIDARITY" AROUND WRITING INSTRUCTION

Oakland University enrolls roughly 16,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students, about 96 percent of whom are Michigan residents with about 84 percent of them coming from the tri-county metropolitan Detroit area. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classifies our institution as a "Doctoral/Research University" (DRU). In our department, faculty members typically teach five courses per year and maintain active research agendas, with the expectation being that faculty members publish a minimum of one peer-reviewed article per year. In the teaching-research continuum of higher education, then, we fall somewhere in the middle—we are not a small liberal arts college with an eight-course teaching load, nor are we a "high" or "very high" research activity institution with a three- or four-course load. It is also important to point out that our students come from widely varying socioeconomic and academic backgrounds, with many students in our department being first-generation college students or nontraditional students returning to college later in life. As a result, our students' writing skills vary widely.

Our group consists of five faculty members in a multidisciplinary department that is home to the Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work, and Criminal Justice programs. In recent years, a combination of faculty retirements, institutional growth, and program growth has led to the hiring of numerous junior faculty members and has changed the complexion of the faculty. All of us were part of this departmental transformation. We vary in our research specializations, teaching interests, and even our disciplines (one of us is trained not in sociology but criminal justice), but what we have in common is that we all teach core theory and methods courses in which we require abundant writing. In the fall of 2011, we formed a collaborative group dedicated to promoting effective writing in our curriculum. The motivations behind our group are (a) to help students produce better papers, thus helping our department produce better sociology graduates, and (b) through a renewed emphasis on writing, to prepare our students better for employment.

Prior to forming our group, we had frequent informal discussions about student writing, but the impulse to formalize these discussions came from two sources. First, one member of our group participated in an interdisciplinary college committee charged with producing an online document that would help promote writing across the university.<sup>1</sup> The committee members took their experience working on writing-improvement techniques back to their respective departments. At the same time, another member of our group was advocating the creation of a departmental writing handbook for students. This concurrent advocacy helped mobilize our existing interest in implementing specific writing-improvement strategies in our courses. Just as important, through our work in common, our group members developed a “culture of solidarity” (Fantasia 1988) around writing instruction.

Led by a supportive chair, junior and senior faculty alike are encouraged to collaborate in a variety of ways along shared research and teaching interests, and this commitment to collaboration shapes the way things are done in our department. For example, at annual retreats we identify issues of shared faculty interest such as mentoring, curriculum, pedagogy, and recruitment. In addition to these somewhat more formal mechanisms of creating professional solidarity, the general warm regard faculty hold for one another is evident in informal socializing, both on campus and off. This emphasis on departmental solidarity results in part from rapid institutional and departmental growth in recent years, which has led faculty members to guard strategically against fragmentation.

These preexisting cultural factors had a direct impact upon the formation of our group. We came together through a combination of informal “hallway chats” and as a result of a faculty retreat. At that retreat, we decided to begin our series of meetings to discuss writing strategies. While all members of our group were interested in improving our students’ writing skills, our interests and our tools would have remained isolated without the active encouragement toward collaboration we received from our department and our university. Once we began this discussion, we achieved a group consensus on strategy by following the collective model established in our departmental culture. We sought methods that would allow each group member as much autonomy and flexibility as possible while still presenting a collective image to our students. In part, we preserved this flexibility by allowing participating instructors to choose from a wide range of strategies. At the same time, we have been able to preserve our effort over

time because through our discussions we have learned that we encounter the same kinds of challenges in the classroom and share similar criteria for evaluating student work. We discussed our assessment methods and shared resources such as assignments and grading rubrics. We stored these documents in an online depository available to all faculty members in our department. Beyond these concrete resources, we also shared more intangible ones such as insights on what works (and what does not) based on our experiences and information on writing-related university policies and resources about which other (particularly new) faculty members may be unaware. As a result, our group members have seen how much we have in common in our mission as instructors.

The formation of our group was not without challenges, however. Perhaps the biggest impediment was finding time to meet regularly within our busy and often conflicting schedules. We also sometimes had difficulty reaching a consensus about the extent to which our efforts should be standardized across faculty and across courses. We all want to help improve students’ writing skills, and we want to work together in doing so, but we also want to maintain autonomy as instructors. Therefore, issues such as papers’ page lengths, whether assignments should include opportunities for revision, and the nature of feedback provided to students are left to individual instructors to determine. Finally, some of the courses we teach (e.g., Intro, Statistics) involve few or no writing assignments and therefore few or no opportunities to implement writing-improvement strategies. This produces variation in the number of strategies used in the courses we teach.

Despite the challenges just noted, our shared vision prompted us to implement a series of writing-improvement strategies in our classes the following semester. Beginning in winter 2012 and continuing through the following academic year (fall and winter 2012–13), the five members of our group simultaneously incorporated these strategies into our courses when appropriate (with deviations in the number of strategies used in any given course, noted previously). It is possible that each individual instructor came to the group with a pre-given set of standards. But it is also quite likely that through our discussions, each group member sharpened his or her own sense of best practices and found in one another’s methods new tools, new ideas, and new approaches to old problems.

None of the six writing-improvement strategies, used in isolation, is new. Therefore, our intent here

is not to explain the mechanics of the strategies in great detail but rather to give readers a sense of what we do and how we collaborate. Subsequently, we turn to an elaboration of the benefits of our collective effort and the related group solidarity surrounding the effort.

## WRITING-IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

*In-class writing exercises* constitute our first writing-improvement strategy. These tend to be “low-risk”—as long as students complete the exercise, they receive full credit. Low-risk writing not only alleviates students’ grade anxiety and promotes more creative, insightful responses, but also dissuades students from simply regurgitating what they think their professor wants to hear. Furthermore, the questions that these exercises pose typically do not ask students to recall specific details from readings, but instead prompt application of course material. For example, a discussion question might ask: “Based on today’s assigned reading, what do you think is the most important implication of this study for policy makers, and why?” Asking students to apply the course material in this manner allows them to develop their critical thinking and writing skills as well as gain confidence in their writing by practicing in a low-risk setting.

The second strategy is *peer review*. As sociologists, we are, among other things, professional writers, and peer review exercises allow sociology instructors to mobilize that expertise. Through our professional activity, we recognize the importance of revision and we realize that writing is a craft. Like any craft, writing improves through constant practice. We do not suddenly become “good writers.” Too often, undergraduates confront writing difficulties with the fatalistic claim, “I’m just not a good writer.” Underlying this claim is the assumption that at some point someone might become a “good writer,” as if entering a new, permanent state of being. Peer review provides students the opportunity to work through their writing—revising, reconsidering, and remaking their texts.

Third, we expose our students to a *library research orientation* in which our social science librarian conducts a workshop on information literacy. The library research orientation exposes students to a wealth of research-related resources. Beyond exposure, though, students need to be able to sort through the wealth of information that they discover. Librarians are particularly well suited to assist in this regard, given their ability to teach

students how to discern relevant information from irrelevant information, scholarly sources from non-scholarly ones, and efficient strategies for extracting and making use of information (Abowitz 1994).

Fourth, we conduct an *in-class writing workshop* to offer students guidance on writing mechanics, hallmarks of scholarly writing, and proper use of the ASA style of citing sources. The specific content of the writing workshops varies somewhat across group members, but they share some commonalities. For example, all members of our group who utilize this strategy cover basic writing mechanics and address concerns related to proper citation. Some of us create PowerPoint slides and distribute a handout to students that includes detailed examples of in-text and reference list citation format, common errors to avoid (e.g., subject/verb disagreement, tense-switching, etc.), and suggestions for improved writing skills (e.g., making use of transitions, avoiding clichés, etc.). Despite variation in the specific lecture format, all group members who employ this strategy allow ample opportunity for students to ask questions and clarify their understanding of the writing material and the requirements of the paper assignment in that particular course.

Finally, based on the premise that properly citing source material is equally important an academic skill as proper writing mechanics, we utilize two strategies aimed at preventing plagiarism: an online *plagiarism tutorial* and a signed *student integrity statement*. The latter was adapted from Sims (2002). Like the research orientation, our university library provides these useful resources for instructor use. The plagiarism tutorial is an online course that explains in detail what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, then presents a quiz to assess students’ comprehension. Students must achieve a certain score in order to pass the quiz; upon doing so they may email to their instructors or print an award-like certificate that includes the student’s name, score, and date of completion. The student integrity statement is a document that students sign and submit along with their papers. It states that the student (a) is the author of the paper and is submitting it only for the current class, (b) cites all paraphrases and direct quotes, (c) includes quotation marks whenever more than three consecutive words from a source have been used, and (d) provides a corresponding list of references. Signing the integrity statement requires students to reflect on plagiarism one more time before submitting their papers, an act that faculty may require students to complete as a condition for submitting papers.

While each member of our group maintains autonomy in his or her implementation of these writing-improvement strategies in the classroom, the vocational solidarity is beneficial both to our students and to us as faculty. First, students understand that the common set of practices and policies and the simultaneous implementation of these strategies across our classes signal a widespread commitment to improving writing. Second, we possess a common vocabulary for the analysis, discussion, and assessment of these strategies, to which we now turn.

## MAJOR THEMES FROM STUDENT SURVEY

A survey of students constitutes the final component of our collective effort to improve sociology students' writing skills. At the conclusion of each semester, each of us identifies the courses in which we implemented writing-improvement strategies (i.e., the courses for which it is appropriate to survey students). We then distribute a link to the online survey to all students in the targeted courses. While we obtained Institutional Review Board approval in anticipation of publishing survey results, this step would be unnecessary for departments' internal assessment purposes (e.g., in conjunction with end-of-semester course evaluations).

The brief online survey asks students to report the extent to which they agree with a number of statements pertaining to each writing-improvement strategy utilized by their professor. For example, students can rate the extent to which they agree that a particular strategy improved their overall writing skills, improved confidence in their writing abilities, and/or made them more aware of issues related to plagiarism and academic integrity. Students can report that they strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, or strongly agree with each statement—or they can report that the statement was not applicable if their professor did not implement the strategy to which the statement pertains. Finally, after responding to the statements about a given strategy, students can type in a response to an open-ended question asking them, "What additional feedback would you like to give to the faculty about [the writing-improvement strategy]?"

The student survey is essential for three reasons. First, it gives us a sense of whether students' attitudes toward the writing-improvement strategies are generally positive or negative. The quantitative results allow us to see which strategies are

being received most and least favorably, and the qualitative comments help us understand the reasons behind the quantitative scores. Second, administering the survey at the end of each semester allows us to track changes in students' feedback over time. We use the results of the surveys to implement changes in subsequent courses toward the goal of improving our collective writing-improvement program. Third, because students indicate the course and instructor for which they are taking the survey, we can compare the results across courses/instructors toward the goal of learning from one another. For example, if one instructor received lower marks on a given strategy compared to another instructor, the former may consult the latter in aiming to improve his or her own subsequent use of that strategy. Our survey questions are available to readers upon request.

In the following, we explain how we use the student survey as a tool for assessing and improving our collective effort. We discuss the major themes coming out of our first three rounds of data collection (surveys administered at the end of the winter 2012, fall 2012, and winter 2013 semesters), as well as how we use the data to strengthen our collective effort. Most importantly, we demonstrate the merits of our collective approach by explaining what we gain from working together as opposed to working in isolation. For the sake of space, we do not present and discuss detailed results from the survey (although, like the survey, that information is available upon request).

### *Increased Satisfaction with the Library Research Orientation*

The first theme emerging from the student survey data is increased satisfaction with the library research orientation over time. Indeed, the quantitative scores on the library orientation questions increased in both the second and third rounds of data collection, making the library orientation the top-ranked writing-improvement strategy in the third round.

The data reveal related reasons why the library research orientation is successful. First, most of our students are emerging adults who appreciate technology and enjoy learning how to use electronic databases, search engines, reference management software, and other tools that make researching their topics convenient and user-friendly. Students report leaving the orientation with concrete research skills that they will use not only for the current course paper but also for their other classes



(both within and outside our department) in which research papers are required, giving the research orientation high “value added.” Second, through the orientation students learn that the academic research process need not be intimidating but instead can be manageable. Third, they learn where they can go for help if they become overwhelmed. This offers students a sense of mastery (or at least competence) in their academic research skills, which in turn offers them confidence in preparing written assignments.

The positive student feedback on the library research orientation indicates to us that this is a writing-improvement strategy well worth continuing to utilize. In our group discussions, and based on the student survey data, we have determined that attending multiple library research orientations is not problematic for the vast majority of students. To the contrary, students often report that they learn something new every time they attend a library research orientation, a finding we elaborate upon in the following section. Tailoring the orientation to the course and the specific writing assignment helps in this regard. One student’s open-ended response on the survey illustrates: “I have been to the library resource orientation a few times. . . . The refresher of the resource material is nice and if a course page has been made, there’s usually some specifics that you didn’t learn before gone over during the orientation.”

### *Consistently Positive Feedback on the In-class Writing Workshop*

The second theme emerging from the student survey data is that the in-class writing workshop is consistently among the highest ranked strategies in terms of student satisfaction. Students report an appreciation for gaining a clear understanding of the instructor’s specific expectations for successful writing and for having an opportunity to ask questions and gain clarity about the academic writing process. For example, “The in-class writing lecture was useful because it gave me a clear idea of what the professor expected for the paper written in [his or her] course.” As noted previously, our students come from diverse academic backgrounds and therefore have highly varied writing skills entering our classes. Many of our students lack significant experience with academic writing techniques and therefore appreciate the opportunity to learn (or refresh) those skills before having them evaluated. Moreover, we find that students appreciate the transparency in expectations these writing workshops create, making them

feel like they know what it takes to produce a good paper.

One concrete strategy that some group members have found to be successful is making grading rubrics available to students during the writing workshop (which occurs well before the assignment deadline). Providing rubrics to students and covering them during the workshop demystifies what constitutes a good paper and offers students specific criteria for preparing their assignments. Additionally, we find that the workshop is a valuable opportunity to show students that we are “on their side” in wanting to help them develop and strengthen their writing skills, which makes students feel supported by faculty. Thus, while our students like the workshop because it offers transparency and clarity in expectations, it also allows us to demonstrate to students our active commitment to assisting them as they develop their writing skills.

### *Consistently Lukewarm Feedback on Peer Review*

The third theme in the survey data is that students provide generally and consistently lukewarm evaluations of the peer review assignments. We believe that student dissatisfaction with peer review has two separate but related sources. First, some students, particularly high-performing students, perceive a mismatch of competencies when paired with lower-performing students. The high performers sometimes feel that their peer reviewers did not provide the kind of feedback necessary to craft an improved paper. These students typically prefer to receive feedback from the professor rather than from a student. This can present instructors with a difficult dilemma—it would be unfair to provide some but not all students with systematic feedback on paper drafts. One group member addresses this issue by telling students that although the professor will not read students’ drafts in their entirety and provide feedback, he welcomes questions after class, during office hours, and via e-mail. In addition, we have become more cognizant of the need to be more strategic in our pairings and avoid randomly assigning peer reviews, keeping in mind the goal that everyone in the class should benefit from the peer review assignment.

Second, students are sensitive to their classmates’ feelings and understandably are hesitant to share criticisms that may hurt those feelings. To address this, one professor shares one of her own article submissions and asks the students to practice

peer review on a portion of it. Students are asked to identify the thesis statement, summarize the research findings, and offer constructive criticism. As a part of the same exercise, the professor also shares some of the actual feedback from the blind reviews she received. Doing this enables students to practice peer review and to learn that peer review is an effective and beneficial part of scholarship.

### **Plagiarism Paranoia**

A final theme emerging from our student surveys, and from one-on-one conversations with students seeking assistance with their papers, pertains to paranoia that students experience surrounding plagiarism. We find that our emphasis on preventing plagiarism leads some students to become fearful of facing repercussions for plagiarizing. This plagiarism paranoia can result in extreme over-citation—some students having this problem provide a parenthetical citation for nearly every sentence in the paper because they fear getting into trouble if they fail to support a point with a citation. Although this does not occur terribly often, we find that it happens often enough to warrant action on our parts to combat it. The challenge for our group members is helping students strike a good balance between under-citation or plagiarism on the one hand and paranoia-driven over-citation on the other hand.

In our collective discussions of this issue, we have shared a number of potential solutions with one another. One member of our group uses his in-class writing workshop as an opportunity to address plagiarism paranoia. Using a published article to illustrate, the instructor points out instances in which parenthetical citations are and are not needed and explains why. Another group member who requires rough drafts of paper sections to be submitted throughout the semester identifies problems with plagiarism on the section drafts. This helps students find the over-/under-citation balance *in their own work* before the final paper is due, giving them the opportunity to sort it out before they might lose credit for over-citing sources or face institutional penalties for plagiarizing. A third member of our group addresses plagiarism paranoia in the context of annotated outlines. These outlines include introductory and concluding paragraphs in which the students must demonstrate proper citation technique. Citation problems are resolved before the student turns the outline into a paper. In sum, we have learned from each other several ways to combat the plagiarism paranoia

that accompanies our emphasis on preventing plagiarism.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on the survey feedback and our own estimations of the success of these writing-improvement strategies, we now turn to a contextualization of our findings. In this section, we offer a series of lessons learned from our project, including alterations to these strategies we have already identified for future courses. We conclude by affirming the merit of our collective effort, supported by the feedback from the student survey and our own observations.

### **Lessons Learned**

Open-ended comments in the survey data reveal that many students pick up on redundancy stemming from our collective effort. However, we believe it is important to distinguish between what we call “repetitive” redundancy, which undermines the impact of the strategies, and what we call “reaffirmative” redundancy, which arguably boosts their impact and indeed is part of the spirit of our collective approach.

The first round of survey data indicated that students experienced some repetitive redundancy from attending multiple library research orientations. Students in upper-level courses who previously had completed one or more library research orientations noted that as senior students they already had this knowledge and, in some cases, felt it was a wasted class period. In the words of one student, “Once we have completed this orientation, why is it necessary to repeat it multiple times?” However, in subsequent semesters, students reported appreciating the orientation even when they had been through it before. One reason for the students’ change in perspective is the tailoring of the orientation to each specific course (noted previously). When the librarians scaled back general information on library resources and focused—with guidance from the instructor—on the resources that would be most useful for the assignment at hand, students experienced less repetitive redundancy and shifted toward reaffirmative redundancy. For example, in an orientation for students working on a social stratification research paper, the librarian demonstrated searching strategies by having students first brainstorm terms related to stratification (e.g., income inequality, socioeconomic status, wealth, etc.) and health (e.g.,

mortality, life expectancy, etc.) and then search for articles using various combinations of those keywords. When library research orientations are more tailored to specific courses, they are less redundant and more beneficial.

Likewise, some students were required to complete the online plagiarism tutorial (which takes approximately 40 minutes to complete) for multiple courses. This was problematic because it felt like busy work to the students and undermined our emphasis on the importance of academic integrity. To address this problem, we established that a tutorial completion certificate obtained any time during the current academic year will suffice. In other words, students may submit their certificate for any course that requires it for an entire academic year, so they need to take the tutorial anew only once per year at most. We hope this adjustment will alleviate the repetitive redundancy students had reported experiencing.

Conversely, the library research orientation and the in-class writing workshop involve reaffirmative redundancy—repetition of the material that helps to underscore its importance. As noted previously, tailoring a library research orientation to the specific course and assignment is important for achieving reaffirmative (rather than repetitive) redundancy. As for in-class writing workshops, students—regardless of class standing—seem to appreciate receiving concrete examples of good writing and learning about their professor's expectations up front. Distributing a hard copy of the lecture notes can help too, as students appreciate being able to refer back to it as they prepare their papers. Our own experience, which is undoubtedly shared by faculty across the country, is that even students in upper-level courses can benefit from additional guidance on writing good papers. We believe that library research orientations and in-class writing workshops are beneficial in every course requiring a writing assignment, due in part to the reaffirmative redundancy that they promote.

The student feedback also can be used to identify modifications and adjustments to be made to each strategy before implementation in future courses. For example, we find that it is important to require students to complete the online plagiarism tutorial early in the semester so that students may utilize the information they learned in the tutorial throughout the semester. Absent this requirement, we learned, some students merely wait until the last minute to complete the tutorial. Building upon the success of one member of our group, another adjustment we plan to make is to include a plagiarism component in the in-class writing workshop.

Leaving coverage of plagiarism issues solely to the tutorial misses an important opportunity to develop reaffirmative redundancy; addressing proper citation format and plagiarism-avoidance techniques in class reinforces what students learn in the tutorial. It also allows us to address the problem of *over-citation* that occurs when students develop plagiarism paranoia.

### *Managing the Message*

Next, we recognize the importance for faculty to “manage the message” about writing in the classroom in order for our efforts to be successful. That is, as instructors we need to be clear about our purpose in using the writing-improvement strategies and their importance for students' improved mastery of writing skills. Moreover, a shared message repeated by all group members helps to construct and maintain the narrative we wish to develop—that writing is highly valued in our department and is a skill students will employ during their academic and professional careers.

Managing the message also helps strengthen the cohesiveness of our group. Student survey data indicate that the writing skills they have developed in one class have helped them succeed not only in their other courses in our department, but across the university. Our collaborative efforts are paying dividends by communicating to students that ours is a shared commitment designed to set them up for success in their writing assignments throughout their academic careers. In particular, we find that the in-class writing workshop is a valuable opportunity to demonstrate to our students that the writing strategies we implement are neither punitive nor arbitrary, but instead are carefully considered assessments designed to assist and support them as they develop as writers. More importantly, this message is echoed and reinforced by members of our group who teach a wide variety of courses, further supporting the message that developing strong student writing is a shared goal.

### *Merits of a Collective Approach*

Finally, our experience affirms that a collective, group approach can accomplish more than separate attempts by individual faculty to emphasize good, scholarly student writing. This observation is based on both the results of our assessment component and our own observations as faculty members.

When it comes to the student response to our endeavor, the survey is designed to assess students'



reactions to the in-class writing-improvement strategies and does not directly measure their recognition of our effort as a concerted one. Nonetheless, we can infer awareness of our collective effort from students' open-ended responses. As noted previously, the redundancy findings reveal that students recognize the emphasis on writing in their classes by multiple professors. Moreover, the overall feedback from students has been favorable, suggesting that our collective strategy not only avoids student resistance, but is in fact generally supported by students. Several students, though, have commented specifically on our collective effort. One student declared that the writing-improvement strategies were "very helpful in not only writing my paper for this particular class but . . . [also] for other classes. It made writing much easier and as a result I received good grades on all of my writing this semester." Another student's remarks sum up our point well:

I really appreciated the effort put forth by the professors to make this work. For once, the faculty understood that we all come from different writing backgrounds. These writing improvement strategies help place us students on even footing. It is nice to know what professors expect from us instead of just assuming we know. Great program to start, and I think the program will help students tremendously.

As faculty members, we have identified several benefits of our collaborative effort on our own. We perceive great value in having conversations to learn from one another's experiences as we work to improve students' writing. For example, we debated the appropriate timing of hosting the in-class writing workshop, discussed whether the plagiarism tutorial should be required or merely encouraged, and identified various "best practices" across our courses. We have ongoing discussions about what we are doing in the classroom and how we can do it better, as the example of peer review assignments noted previously illustrates. Indeed, our effort is organic. Our purpose in implementing these strategies is not a pragmatic attempt to ease our teaching duties, but instead is rooted in a sincere, shared commitment to improving our students' writing.

As this article demonstrates, collaborating to improve students' writing need not begin as a department-wide effort. Instead, a small group of committed faculty members who communicate, collaborate, and operate with a shared vision can initiate larger, department-wide changes. For

example, we plan to present an overview of our collective effort to the entire faculty in order to share resources even more widely and to begin a conversation about adopting department-wide standards and strategies for student writing.

We began our informal conversation by identifying specific skills that we hope majors who emerge from our degree program will possess, and writing like a sociologist was primary among them. Ensuring that majors graduate with a common skill set that includes the ability to prepare a scholarly, sociological manuscript is, we believe, most easily achieved when there is a shared commitment to the goal among faculty, be it in a small group or across the department. While undoubtedly many departments have a collective commitment to improving students' sociological writing, we believe the endeavor to create a conscious culture of solidarity around writing instruction, and thus to share our collective resources, brought us closer to our goal.

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## NOTES

The authors made equal contributions to this article and are listed in alphabetical order.

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1. In 2011, Associate Dean Robert Stewart of Oakland University asked several members of the University's faculty to collaborate on the "Writing-to-Learn Wiki," a writing resource for university faculty and students. This interdisciplinary group included Lori Ostergaard (Writing & Rhetoric), Andrea Kozak (Psychology), Mark Rigstad (Philosophy), and Graham Cassano (Sociology). Many of the writing strategies explored in this paper also appear in the Wiki. See <http://writingtolearnou.pbworks.com>.

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