

## Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education: Improving Research Writing Skills in a Writing-Emphasis Health Counseling Course

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### Abstract

It is frequently noted by college professors that students are ill prepared to conduct proper research. In order to address this problem, the authors discuss the use of a set of instructions to enable students to reach their writing potential. The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education by Chickering and Gamson (1987) formulate a set of guidelines to improve teaching and learning. This paper will list the seven principles followed by the approach that the authors took in adhering to the principles.

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High school students enter college with varying degrees of writing backgrounds and this affects their ability to author quality research papers. It is imperative to make sure that when students enter a class, they are provided with useful instructions that can aid in their research and final papers. It is frequently noted by college professors that students are ill prepared to conduct proper research. Although freshmen partake in a college-level writing course, the principles learned in such a course are often forgotten and need to be reinforced. Beyond the learning environment, the ability to write coherent business reports, research articles, and even e-mail is gaining critical importance (Schmalz & Moliterno, 2001). In order to address this problem, one of the authors (Dr. Kathleen Schmalz) uses a set of instructions to get her students to reach their writing potential. In this article, a Health Counseling class, which is a writing-emphasis course and is honors eligible will be discussed. Students orally present their written projects to the class at the end of the semester. They are graded on the following: research paper; term project (case study); counseling session; learning experience;

critique of articles (compare and contrast); and an in-class exam which consists of multiple choice and short answer questions, as well as essays.

The *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* by Chickering and Gamson (1987) formulate a set of guidelines to improve teaching and learning. Each guideline uses the criteria discussed below for developing an extensive learning approach to education. Each criterion includes: activity, expectations, cooperation, interaction, diversity and responsibility. This paper will list the seven principles followed by the approach that Professor Schmalz took in adhering to the principles.

### **Principle #1 - Encourages Contact Between Students and Faculty**

Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment

and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

A professor of health education encompasses many topics that may be seen as technical in nature and therefore difficult to write about, e.g., the subject of human sexuality as it is taught at the college level. The subject of human sexuality is inherently multidimensional (Schmalz & Moliterno, 2001). Through the professor's teachings, she has found that students' papers are better when they are given an orientation about the assignment during the first day of class. Students are also instructed that their research paper will be evaluated periodically throughout the semester to prevent plagiarism and procrastination. On the first day of class, the professor reviews the syllabus. (The syllabus and other course materials are available through Blackboard®, an electronic educational platform.) After it is reviewed, students are given a list of suggested topics that their research can cover. Students follow this up by researching and selecting the topic of their choice. After doing some preliminary research, students finalize their topic.

In order to succeed academically in the latter years of education, students must find a way to effectively use the library and other resources at their disposal. Many students do not have the skills to uncover the potential benefits of the library and thus are reluctant to use it. This problem can be defined as "library anxiety." Constance A. Mellon has defined library anxiety as, "an uncomfortable feeling or emotional disposition experienced in a library setting that has cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioral ramifications" (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1997). When students are affected by library anxiety it interferes with their attention and ability to focus, and thus hinders their ability to learn. It is important to get the students into the library early in the semester and early on in their college years to dispel any anxiety or negative feelings that they may have. The role of the librarian is to serve as an intermediary between the professor and the student. There may be less pressure to talk to librarians as opposed to the

professor because they are a non-grading participant.

Dr. Schmalz collaborates with Steve Feyl, Electronic Services Librarian, to educate students on how to conduct research for papers and presentations. They introduce this research process to the students by conducting a one half-hour session for them in the library. Prior to the start of the semester, they work together and discuss the assignments that the students will receive. In the librarian's session for the students, he explains that despite the rapid growth and availability of information on the Internet, students must find reliable sources on which to base their research. The information gathered must be from credible resources and must be cited properly. (The professor requires that students use American Psychological Association citation style.) Many students cannot differentiate between legitimate sources and undocumented information on the Internet. The librarian discusses the college library web page, the on-line book catalog, various indexes and abstracts at their disposal, subject guides (Internet resources by academic subject areas), and Internet search engines. He also assists the class by providing them with websites and handouts that will help the students with APA citation style and creating thesis statements. The session ends by assuring the students that he and the other library staff are available to help them whenever they need it. More than to teach them how to use the specific resources, the most important goal of the session is to break the unseen barrier between students and the library. By assuring the students that the goal of the library staff is to support them in their research and to associate this support with a friendly face in the library, it is hoped that the barrier between students and the library will disappear.

Although this is the only organized session in the library, communication remains open throughout the course between the professor, the librarian, and the students in the class. Once the relationship has been established in the first session, the professor is able and confident to send students to the librarian(s) for follow up sessions. It is in these encounters, that students tend to learn the most. This open communication

allows for those who understand how to do research to teach the others and for those who do not, to learn the skills necessary for effective research.

According to Swaine (1999), "The role of librarians is changing and collaboration with teachers is becoming a goal of many academic libraries." The teachers are vital in this relationship because they must realize the librarians' potential and skills and appreciate how they can be valuable in the learning process. "The importance of the teacher-librarian relationship cannot be understated if there is to be a workable library program in a school. The librarian is truly at the 'mercy' of the teacher. It is never the other way around" (Robbins, 1984).

One way to get students to learn is to present information from different perspectives. This is the purpose of collaborative learning. Although the intention of the teacher-librarian relationship is to assist the students in a particular class, the information they learn can be integrated into all of their courses and beyond.

### **Principle #2 - Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students**

Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

During the second class session, the professor checks the students' topics to see if anybody has changed his/her topic since they last met. Since writing is an ongoing process, it is important to make sure that the students do not fall behind early in the semester. They need to stay on track with the rest of the class and to follow through and complete the given assignments. Besides the actual choosing of a topic, the first assignment, due at the third class, is the list of references that are being used for the paper. Students must provide the professor with copies of their references (physically bring in the

articles, books, or any other material that they are going to use in their paper) and a typed page with the references in correct APA format. This forces the students to do their research early. In class, the students exchange their reference lists and check each other for correct formatting. As they are doing this, the professor walks around the room to see if the students are on task. The professor makes suggestions and notes corrections. After the professor marks in her grade book that the student did the assignment, she tells the students to take their references home and to make any necessary corrections. Others are directed to the Writing Center.

The thesis statement is also handed in at the beginning of this class and discussed. The professor must approve the thesis before the student can write their paper. In this class the professor presents materials to the class that will assist them in preparing their thesis. She also discusses several thesis questions out loud asking if they are clear or vague. If vague, the class is asked to give suggestions on how to improve them.

In discussing thesis statements and their role in developing proper research papers, the professor breaks the material down into three sections: beginning, body, and ending.

**Beginning:** The students are instructed to include their thesis statement in their opening paragraph, as this idea will be carried on throughout the paper. To ensure that the thesis statement is debatable, the students are required to write their thesis in question format, which makes it easier for the students to recognize whether their topic is suited for debate.

**Body:** This section is dedicated to the arguments. Students are encouraged to think of their topics as a debate. They present the pros and cons to their topic, as well as their own views on the subject. If students are unable to present all of these sides, their thesis is not debatable and the students must revise their paper.

**Ending:** This section sums up the paper. A question is posed to the students to check their

thesis at the end of the paper. They must ask themselves, "Did I answer the thesis question throughout the paper?" If the answer to this question is no, then the students realize that their paper is not adequate and must be revised.

### **Principle #3 - Encourage Active Learning**

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

With these materials in hand, students gather a better understanding of what is expected out of their thesis statement and their research paper as a whole. According to Dr. Barbara Smith (2001), a teacher can ask the group to evaluate each student's thesis statement. They can ask each other for suggestions following a checklist that may include the following:

- \* The thesis has only one controlling idea.
- \* The thesis is focused enough to be thoroughly discussed in X pages.
- \* The thesis statement makes the writer's point of view, position, or attitude clear rather than just declaring what the topic will be.
- \* The thesis is supportable.
- \* An intelligent person might well take an opposing view.
- \* The thesis statement is interesting (p. 137)

Students can move on in the writing process only if they have a concise thesis statement because this statement is the glue that holds the paper together.

During multiple class sessions, students go through the peer evaluation process before handing in their work to the professor. This is another opportunity for students to receive assistance on their paper. After the students bring in a typed copy of their paper, other students are given the opportunity to critique the paper and provide feedback through a Peer

Review Worksheet. In order for this process to be effective, it must be highly structured and address specific needs of the paper. Questions on the review worksheet include yes or no with space left for suggestions. Examples of these questions are:

- \* Is the writer's position articulated in a clear thesis statement?
- \* Are there logical transitions between paragraphs?
- \* Is the choice of words appropriate?
- \* Is there grammatical and structural correctness?

### **Principle #4 - Gives Prompt Feedback**

Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. When getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence. In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college, and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

After the peer evaluation is completed, students will look at the suggestions and make necessary changes as the professor walks around the classroom, assists students, peruses their papers, and makes suggestions. Students take their papers home for revision, and submit them the following week. After reviewing the paper, the professor sets up appointments with each class member. She then decides which students should be sent to the Writing Center to receive further instruction and assistance. Each student is required to submit his or her research paper to the professor on a floppy disk or CD-ROM and a hard copy. As suggested early in the semester, the student should store all their work on a computer for further development of a student portfolio. According to Chickering and Ehrmann (1996), "Computers can keep track of early efforts, so instructors and students can see the extent to which later efforts demonstrate gains in knowledge, competence, or other valued outcomes."

### **Principle #5 - Emphasizes Time on Task**

Time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty. How an institution defines time expectations for students, faculty, administrators, and other professional staff can establish the basis of high performance for all (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Asking the students to hand in their thesis statement, references, and their research paper at different times saves the professor a lot of work. Peer reviewing picks up errors such as spelling, grammar, or incorrect APA formatting. If students need help from the Writing Center, there is still enough time left in the semester to receive that help. (Note: the Writing Center has a copy of the assignment as well.)

Students, who habitually procrastinate until the last minute, cannot complete the required steps outlined here. Students who do not hand in work on time will lose points on the final paper or receive an "F." With this format, students come to the professor's office early on—even right after the first class — to ask for help with their thesis statement or APA format. With the inception of e-mail, many students contact her to ask questions pertinent to their paper. She does not get an "end of semester" line of students outside her office.

### **Principle #6 - Communicate High Expectations**

Expect more and you will get more. High expectations are important for everyone -- for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations for themselves and make extra efforts (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

By establishing the librarian/student/teacher relationship, students eagerly seek out further help for other assignments. Students realize that there are high expectations in the class. If they choose not to fulfill the requirements, they have the option to drop the class. The research paper assignment makes the writing process very deliberate, and in doing so, prior learning about the separate ingredients that are essential in creating a successful research paper is reinforced. Different samples of excellent, average and below average work are used as guides for the students. A grading rubric is given to each student prior to starting his or her research paper. Each student is aware of what criteria are expected in order to do excellent work. Since writing has become such an important tool of communication, students must become proficient in this area.

### **Principle #7 - Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning**

There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college. Brilliant students in the seminar room may be all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students rich in hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come so easily (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

According to Chickering and Ehrmann (1996), "Technological resources can ask for different methods of learning through powerful visuals and well-organized print; through direct, vicarious, and virtual experiences; and through tasks requiring analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, with applications to real-life situations. They can encourage self-reflection and self-evaluation." As part of the class requirements the professor utilizes different approaches to the learning process. In addition to the writing requirements, there are oral presentations that have a PowerPoint component or other visual media. This allows the students to express their views and thoughts in many different ways.

The authors hope that this discussion of the Seven Principles will assist teachers, librarians and undergraduate students alike in improving

their writing skills. For details and further information, the authors recommend reading the references listed in this article.

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