

Career-Related Writing Sequences in Interdisciplinary Writing Program Service-Learning Writing Links Autumn 2012-Spring 2014

Patrick Chidsey (UW Career Center; chidsey@uw.edu) and Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill (esoneill@uw.edu) and Carrie Matthews crmatthe@uw.edu (Interdisciplinary Writing Program)

Overview

"The career-related writing sequence made me think about the career I want and my personal development within that career."

There is an ongoing national debate about whether a Liberal Arts education ought to prepare intellectually sophisticated, critically aware and engaged future citizens for a democracy, or provide vocational education leading to post-college employment. In the context of this debate, Patrick Chidsey of the UW Career Center and Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill and Carrie Matthews of the English Department's Interdisciplinary Writing Program offered career-related writing assignment sequences in four service-learning writing-link contexts from Autumn 2012 through Spring 2014: writing links with Geography/JSIS 123, Sociology 110 and Sociology 292, and the Community Literacy Program. In all of these courses, all students were engaged in community-based service-learning work in non-profit organizations and public schools. In all of these courses, students were asked to re-see their academic and community-based learning as dependable strengths that build toward academic, civic, personal and career goals.

Patrick, Elizabeth and Carrie sought to bring career-related writing into the academic classroom, helping students identify their own strengths and interests, and encouraging them to develop the ability to articulate what they had learned through academic and service-learning in the context of identifying and applying for a specific job or internship. Like any writing assignment, this career-related assignment meant students needed to be aware of the conventions of writing in the requisite genres, and to understand the rhetorical context of the situation and audience, including what would count as evidence and how to construct a compelling argument. We experimented with four different versions of the calendar for this sequence (three 50-minute classes, one and a half 110 minutes sessions, a single 110 minute session, and two 50-minute sessions).

The 123 students who participated in these career-related writing sequences included 1 graduate student, 37 seniors, 20 juniors, 21 sophomores and 46 freshmen. In all quarters there was a diverse range of linguistic and academic backgrounds and goals. Students' home languages included English (a majority) as well as Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Russian, Hindi, Marathi, Hawaiian Creole and Spanish. Their majors included Anthropology, Biology, Business, Curriculum and Instruction, Early Childhood and Family Studies, English, International Studies, Math, Psychology, Pre-Health Sciences, Pre-Engineering, Sociology, Community Environment and Planning, and Speech and Hearing.

Both the curriculum and our methods of assessment evolved over these six quarters. Among our findings: 28 of 30 students surveyed felt the English IWP writing link contributed to their thinking about personal, civic, academic or career development and the connections among them. 87 of 89 students said they would use what they had learned in the career-sequence in future job searches and applications. (One said "maybe," and one said "no" because s/he was already familiar with the information in the sequence.) All students surveyed over the six quarters were asked to rate the career-related assignment sequence on a scale of 0 to 5. The average rating was a 4.6, and open-ended comments on student evaluations for these writing courses often referred specifically to the career-related writing sequence

Lecture and Writing Link Curricular Contexts

"I had never before made a cover letter, and I had been very insecure about my resume, but after that short period of time working with the Career Center staff I left much more confident. This is one of the many activities that have greatly contributed to my learning this quarter."

In Prof. Matt Sparke's Autumn 2012 Geography/JSIS 123 course, as students learned in Geography 123 about the economic, political and social consequences of globalization, they also volunteered in community-based organizations and public schools, which often respond to complexities of globalization. In Elizabeth's writing links, students completed academic research, writing and presentation assignments analyzing their community-based experience in the context of Geography/JSIS 123, wrote reflective essays on the nature and impact of their learning, and completed the career-related writing sequence with Patrick. The career sequence reinforced central goals of Elizabeth's composition class, as students saw clearly the commonalities among these types of writing -- rhetorical awareness of audience and genre, attention to what will count as effective evidence and compelling argument, recognition of complexities to be accounted for -- and in each assignment developed the skills of working individually and collaboratively to plan, draft, revise and edit each type of writing.

The positions of interest selected by our Autumn 2012 students suggested the potential impact of academic and service-learning on their thinking about personal, civic and career goals: students chose campus leadership positions (Resident Assistant, Orientation Leader, FIG leader), careers in the non-profit sector related to their service-learning work (Global Youth Reproductive Education, Red Cross), and entry level positions and internships in areas of career interest (optometry, publishing, architecture) drawing on skills they'd gained as service-learners. Several international students were pleased to identify types of internships and on-campus jobs for which they could apply.

Matt Sparke concluded his Geography/JSIS 123 course noting that while higher education is often seen as creating "global entrepreneurs," our work with students draws on and helps develop skills that also create "global citizens." The IWP Writing Links and the career-related writing sequence were an effective location for bringing together academic content (Geography/JSIS 123) and service-learning through a sequence of writing projects that continually asked students to represent, analyze and reflect on their learning, and the future implications of that learning.

In Community Literacy Program (linking an English course with a public school internship in Winter and Spring 2013 and 2014), and Autumn 2013 service-learning writing links with Sociology 110 and Sociology 292, students brought together service-learning, concepts from the Social Sciences, and research and writing instruction offered in the links and in partnership with UW Libraries. They completed projects including constructing and analyzing original surveys, analyzing quantitative data related to their volunteer sites, reflective writing, field notes, proposals for original academic research projects modeled on professional work in the Social Sciences, Teach-In group projects in which students shared analysis of their service-learning and designed and implemented a lesson, and course-based Research Conference presentations in which they shared their proposals and preliminary findings as members of panels modeled on academic conferences.

In each of these cases, the career-related writing sequence occurred toward the end of the quarter, putting career-related writing in the context of students' reflection on their learning, and the implications of that learning for their personal, academic, civic and professional goals

The Career-Related Writing Sequence Going Forward

".... I actually got hired at the Neonatology Lab that I applied to with the resume and cover letter I wrote in your class! He e-mailed me back for an interview the day after I sent the documents to him, and I got hired on the spot during the interview. I would really like to thank you for providing this opportunity for me. If it were not for your class, I would never even have thought of applying for this job! My first day of work will be this Friday and I absolutely love the place that I will be working. Thank you so much once again!"

Based on student feedback, student work, and our own reflection and analysis, as co-teachers we conclude that:

- Students find this assignment sequence tremendously useful. Their ratings are high, their open-ended comments wide-ranging and positive, and nearly all students report they will use what they learned in this sequence in future applications.
- The sequence works best with sufficient time. While it is possible to do this sequence in fewer class sessions, three 50-minute sessions, or one and a half 110-minute sessions, seems to be optimal for this assignment sequence.
- Students continue to find the Career Guide and audio slides, the range of samples, the discussion of selected samples from within their class, and the opportunity to ask questions very valuable.
- The assignment sequence itself seems to work well, building explicitly from dependable strengths, especially those gained from community-based and academic experience, to positions of interest, and then to targeted resume and cover letter. Students are experienced peer reviewers when they complete this project, and have found the discussion of colleagues' samples using the peer review rubric a useful tool. A winter 2014 student noted that s/he is taking this peer review and revision skill beyond the classroom: *"The career portion was extremely useful. I am helping all of my friends with their resumes."*
- Students appreciate instructor/Career Center feedback on all drafts. In Winter and Spring 2014 we accomplished this by involving the co-teachers Career Center undergraduate peer advisors in small-group discussion of electronic version of all resume and cover letter drafts in the English Department's Computer-Integrated Courses computer lab.
- Co-teachers from the Career Center and the Interdisciplinary Writing Program find this partnership valuable for their own professional development, and positive feedback from students confirmed our conclusions about the value of infusing career-related assignments/activities into curriculum. Feedback also confirmed that exposing students to campus and career resources and services early on in their undergraduate years is a good thing. As one student noted, *"I really liked the Career Center assignment, especially as a senior getting ready for the workforce. Wish I had done something like it earlier in my undergrad."* Another comment from Spring 2014 is typical of what we hear after this sequence: *"I literally sent my final draft resume to an employer as soon as I finished it. The session we had was very useful."*
- Detailed assignment sequences are available from the instructors.