

Backwards By Design (BBD) Mini-Study Report

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In the fall of 2015, I started my first quarter teaching at Western in the Kinesiology program in the Department of Health and Development. During my first year, I taught three brand new courses that were not related to my areas of expertise. One of these courses was *KIN 422: Professional Issues in Health and Exercise Settings*, which is a WP3 course that satisfies the writing requirement for students in Kinesiology. I taught the course twice in my first year and, while I felt mostly satisfied with my selection of course content, I knew that I wanted to make substantial revision to my writing assignment prompts, feedback tools, and in-class writing instruction. Therefore, I used my time at the 2016 Backwards by Design (BbD) retreat to focus solely on improving my instruction of KIN 422.

Identifying Threshold Concepts

At the outset of the BbD retreat, we read about and discussed “threshold concepts.” On the first day of the retreat, I identified three threshold concepts for *KIN 422*, which included ideas related to unspoken workplace dynamics, aspects of worker motivation, and effective leadership styles. However, after hearing our facilitators and my colleagues discuss their courses’ threshold concepts, I realized that the majority of my assessment tools in *KIN 422* were not related to those three lecture topics at all! While the aforementioned topics serve as the content of our class discussions, my primary objective in the course is to improve students’ professional and technical writing ability. Therefore, my main assessments are writing assignments on topics of their choosing (rather than exams on specific content of those three areas). As such, I scrapped my notes from Day 1 of BbD and started over with identifying threshold concepts related to writing that I could organize my assignments and in-class instruction around.

In reflecting on potential threshold concepts related to writing on day two, the primary issue I had with my former students’ *KIN 422* writing became more apparent to me. Given that the majority of writing assignments in the Kinesiology program are in the form of lab reports or article responses, our students are mostly trained in the art of concise expository writing that follows very strict APA style formatting requirements. We appear to offer little instruction in persuasive writing in our program and very rarely do we encourage creative writing. Not surprisingly, I noticed that my *KIN 422* students in the 2015-2016 year were fairly skilled at course assignments that required summarizing academic research articles, but struggled with the creative and persuasive writing assignments I included in the course. In particular, they were much less skilled than I had expected at writing a cover letter for a job or a personal statement for graduate school admission (they select whether they write a letter or a statement). Specifically, I noticed that students had difficulty writing engaging, memorable, and persuasive cover letters. Typically, I received submissions that simply listed three adjectives

about themselves like “hardworking, reliable, and organized” or relied on clichés like they had applied because they want to “help people.”

Therefore, I decided to focus my BbD retreat energy on helping my students to master an important threshold concept related to being an effective writer: *One must first identify the audience and purpose of a piece of writing, and then must match the level of formality for the writing piece, determine appropriate word choice, and emphasize what is most important to the particular audience of the piece.*

In other words, I determined at BbD that in order to improve my students’ writing, I first needed them to realize that what is considered “good writing” varies depending on the purpose of the piece. I realized that I had never specifically articulated this concept to my previous students, but it is truly a threshold concept they need in order to perform well on the varied written assignments in KIN 422. Given that I had not guided my former students to a clear understanding of this concept, it was not surprising that they had submitted concise, uniform, and highly similar letters/statements; they were simply applying the “good writing” we had reinforced in their lab reports for our other Kinesiology courses, which led to unsuccessful cover letters or personal statements.

Teaching the Threshold Concept

I spent the latter half of the BbD retreat determining how to change my instruction in light of my newly identified threshold concept. In the case of the cover letter assignment, I wanted students to be more aware of the key purpose of the writing piece, which is for the reader to get to know the writer as a unique individual, with particular skills and strengths. In other words, I needed them to learn that an effective cover letter or personal statement must be more personal, much more descriptive, and more persuasive than their usual expository assignments. This was difficult for them because lab report writing is not personal (typically uses the third person) and instead requires use of standardized language to describe results in a clear manner. If my students were successful in achieving and understanding of this threshold concept, they would be able to understand that they need to vary their word choice and give descriptive, rich examples in their cover letters and personal statements.

Methods to Increase Students’ Understanding of the Threshold Concept

In order for students to understand the threshold concept, I targeted the idea of descriptive word choice and personal examples. I used time at Bbd to design in-class activities around those targets. I incorporated many ways to improve my students’ persuasive and descriptive writing abilities, including those listed below:

- a. For descriptive word choice, on the first day of class I started to explain how professional and descriptive word choice enhances writing effectiveness. As an in-class activity, I asked each student to write down ten words that described their own personality. Afterward, I introduced the importance of using precise, descriptive word choice in order to enhance clarity for the reader and reduce assumptions. I gave the following example to consider, “What does one mean when someone says that they are nice? What are other, more precise words, one could use instead of nice in order to be

more exact?" I then facilitated a discussion on differences between variations on nice, like "thoughtful" or "empathetic." I then asked the students to return to their list of words and revise them to be more precise. The class then reads three words from their list to everyone as an icebreaker activity.

b. For targeting improvement in creative and memorable writing, I designed a few other novel activities during my time at BbD. For example, without telling students in advance I asked them to recall as many of their classmates' words as possible during a class session that is 2-3 meetings after the class activity described above. I specifically picked 5 students out of the class and asked the rest of the class to try to remember their words. In this activity, the class got 3 out of 15 correct during fall of 2016 and only 1 out of 15 correct during the winter 2017 course. Their recall of the words was poor because most students shared easily forgettable words like "hardworking." I then made the point that adjectives are not very memorable; we need more of a story or more creativity and detail to have the information stay with the reader (or listener). I then explained that an effective cover letter or statement uses rich descriptions or anecdotes that provides a window into the author's personality or skills. We finished that class with an in-class activity that required that the students create a metaphor to share with their classmates about one of their key strengths or to describe a relevant work experience. These metaphors were quite memorable to the students, as I checked their retention of their classmates' metaphors one week later and got high accuracy in recall.

c. Finally, since BbD, I have created new handouts and in-class peer-editing activities that target a few common words that students overuse like "good," "a lot," or "do" and offer descriptive and specific alternatives (e.g. "good" → "effective", "a lot" → "substantial"; "I do a lot of things at my job" → "I successfully manage numerous tasks"). The goal of these worksheets and activities is to help students to be more mindful about instances when they can enhance their word choice. In addition, I have included peer-review worksheets that require students to circle all instances of "good" "a lot" and other overused words on their peer's drafts of a paper. Then, they give their peer an alternative, more descriptive word.

Assessment

Overall, I have seen substantial improvement in my students' use of descriptive examples and more specific word choices on their assignments after implementing the above strategies. In reviewing the cover letter assignment, the vast majority of my students in KIN 422 during the 2016-2017 year appeared to have attained the threshold concept I have articulated in this study. Specifically, they appeared to understand the importance of creativity, individuality, and description. This year, I almost exclusively received submissions that gave specific anecdotes and evidence of the author's skills and strengths, rather than use of clichés or simple lists of traits. Additionally, many of my students have effectively used metaphors to uniquely convey to the reader that they possess the skills necessary for graduate school or the job.

As a way to try to quantify and measure the influence of my new teaching strategies, I have compared scores on the cover letter/personal statement assignment in the course from students in my fall 2015 section (pre BbD) and in my fall 2016 section (post BbD). I also examined my teaching evaluations for comments about my instruction related to the areas I had intended to target, both pre and post BbD.

a. Cover letter/personal statement grades:

I have three drafts of this assignment: an ungraded peer review draft, a graded first draft, and a graded final draft. I used the graded first draft scores to determine if my peer review worksheets and in-class activities were helpful in improving their first draft scores. I believe that the graded first draft is the most accurate reflection of their comprehension of the goals of the assignment and their individual writing ability, as it precedes any feedback from me. The scores were as follows:

- Pre BbD → Fall 2015 average graded cover letter first-draft scores: 40.03/50
- Post BbD → Fall 2016 average graded cover letter first-draft scores: 41.12/50

There appeared to be a modest improvement in their scores on the assignment. In particular, the primary area on the assignment rubric where there were increases were on the item: *Individuality: Does the piece effectively distinguish the author from other applicants? Is the letter free of clichés?* In addition, students' scores on the *writing quality and style* section of the rubric were slightly higher for my post BBD course.

b. Student Course Evaluation Feedback Samples

Sample student course evaluation feedback and suggestions from fall 2015:

In my fall 2015 course evaluations, I received praise for the content of the lectures and for the amount of feedback I gave on students' writing, but received critiques and suggestions about the need for more time in class for writing instruction as well as peer review. Some example comments include:

- "The focus should be less on the readings and more on the writing techniques. I think more in class time for writing and peer-review would be helpful."
- "I often felt rushed when we did in class assignments. My best work was not allowed due to the limited time I was given."
- "I enjoyed the resume but it all happened so fast that I wasn't able to spend much time to really perfect those skills."

Sample student course evaluations from Fall 2016 and Winter 2017:

After the BbD retreat and implementation of new teaching strategies related to the identified threshold concept, I received specific feedback about the utility of focusing on word choice and creativity in writing; these two areas were never mentioned in my pre- BbD student evaluations. Some examples include:

- "I also found the list of alternative words to replace ones like "show" to be really helpful."
- "Tips and tricks on how to improve my writing were useful. "

- “I think this class made me a better writer than any other class I’ve taken.”
- “The projects allowed for a lot of creativity and would be extremely useful in the future.”
- “Instructions for peer editing were very clear and allowed for the first portion of the assignment to go smoother. Multiple drafts lead me to put together some good writing.”

Conclusions

Overall, I believe that attending BbD directly led to improvement in my teaching of KIN 422. I can also see improvements in my students’ work as a result of designing my course backward, with threshold concepts in mind first. Although it seems almost absurdly simple, a main lesson I learned from attending BbD was that if I expect my students to have a particular writing skill (because I have deemed that skill to be a core concept), then I need to devote more in-class time on writing instruction that actually targets that skill. In this case, I have learned that I must specifically teach students how to be flexible with their writing styles in order to match the goal of the piece, using targeted in-class activities, as well as clearly explain why such flexibility is necessary for effective writing.