

Backwards By Design Reflection  
Ying Li  
Department of Health and Human Development

My participation in Backwards By Design workshop was largely driven by my struggles in HLED 465 Program Evaluation and Research Design that is a major core class for our Community Health students. HLED 465 is a 5 credit WP3 research oriented course that emphasizes the instrument design and writing skills. In this class, students are asked to work with their peers (4-5 students per group) to come up research questions, design an instrument (questionnaires or interview moderator guide), collect and analyze data, and write a group thesis as the final product. The group thesis includes introduction with extensive literature review, methods, results, and discussion and implications. After adding the reference list, tables, the final product usually contains 30-45 pages. This is a great assignment because it provides students the opportunity to put all the pieces they have learned in classroom into a real-life project. In addition, it fosters students' interest in conducting research and potentially provides the opportunity to present their results in a professional conference. However, there are several challenges associated with this assignment:

- 1) Time. Western has a quarter system, which only has 10 weeks for a normal quarter. To complete the whole process of this assignment, we must move forward timely. For example, students need to have their research questions by the second week into the quarter. In addition, we don't have much turn-around time for every draft that students turn in for feedback.
- 2) The balance between the quality of the final product and completing the assignment on time. Ideally, I would ask for 2-3 drafts for each section of the final thesis. In reality, it is not feasible and sustainable for both students' and my own sanity.
- 3) The writing skills among students. The writing skills vary quite differently among students with synthesizing literature and organizing thoughts in a logic way seem most challenging for students.

From the workshop, I learned a lot about how to design meaningful assignments, and how to help students to improve their writing. For this specific assignment in HLED 465 mentioned above, there are two ideas that are particularly helpful. The first idea is to break down the high-stake assignments into multiple low stake tasks. In the past, students were required to turn in drafts for different sections of the paper. However, those drafts didn't link with the final grade directly. Students only received points for the final thesis (the high stake), but not the drafts. Because of that, I found that the quality of drafts sometimes can be depressing, which dramatically increased my workload for providing feedback and made it harder to have the final paper with high quality.

Following the high-stake vs low stake idea, I broke down the high-stake assignment---- the final group thesis into 10 low stake assignments with various points----- outline and a draft for introduction, instrument, method, results, and discussion. To better support students' efforts, a

lecture about how to develop an outline was provided, which was based on the information from Purdue Online Writing lab (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/1/>). After students turned in their outline, I provided feedback to help students better organize their ideas to have a logic structure for the final paper. The outline also provided a road map for students to write the drafts. Thanks to the generosity of Dr. Kelli Evans, I adopted her two writing assignments to demonstrate the differences between summarizing an article and synthesizing articles, and more importantly how to use article summary for the purpose of synthesizing. Last, I also required students to work with the writing center to help with their revising and editing in addition to my feedback. From my teaching experience, I believe that it is very beneficial for students to hear similar suggestions but from different sources. Talking with students has confirmed that these strategies have been effective in helping students to manage this course assignment.

The second idea I learned from this workshop is to use demonstration to teach about writing. During the workshop, we had the opportunity to listen to each other's ideas of teaching about writing. A particular idea I learned from those presentations is to show students how we work on our own writings. Specifically for this quarter, I showed my students a manuscript I was currently submitting for publication. First, I explained to my students the outline I used for the manuscript and the reasoning behind it. Second, I showed students the first draft I came up with. Third, I compared the first draft with the version I submitted for the journal with a clear explanation of why changes were made. Fourth, I showed the comments from the journal reviewers and the corrections I made for the final version of the manuscript. I believe that the whole demonstration process is very helpful to students in three ways: demonstrated the writing process and techniques; reinforced the idea that revision is necessary; and encouraged the reception of feedback.

Though there are still rooms for improvement for HLED 465, students feedback indicated the success of adopting the strategies mentioned above. I plan to continue to implement the practice I did this quarter in the future. At the same time, I look forward to the opportunities to reconnect with cohort members from this workshop to learn from each again.