

5 Using Social Science to Help Oneself and Others: Robison's Human Sexuality Course

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This chapter explores Susan Miller Robison's Human Sexuality class at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, a small Catholic college whose undergraduate day program contained about 600 students, all women. We explore how the roles of teacher and students differed from those in Sherman's and Breihan's classes at the much larger, more selective, coeducational Loyola College, and how those roles affected thinking and writing in Robison's class. Here we concentrate on four areas of difficulty:

1. Constructing the audience and the self
2. Stating a position
3. Managing complexity
4. Using discipline-based methods to arrive at and support a position

At the end of the chapter, we examine the effects of Robison's and peers' responses to student drafts. Our theoretical framework and our methods of data collection and data analysis are described in Chapter 2. The characteristics of the class and of the focus group of students we used for some of our analyses are described on p. 18 and in Appendix B.

ROLES IN ROBISON'S COURSE

The professional-in-training role (pp. 8–9), which all four teachers expected students to adopt, took a somewhat different form in each

class. In Sherman's class, there was an underlying assumption of power embedded in the business decision-maker role—the assumption that the decision maker was a manager in charge of a firm's production and, though she or he was obligated to listen to others' opinions, gather information, and consider alternatives and counterarguments, the final decision was in the hands of the manager who had the power to see that it was carried out. In Breihan's class, the role was arguer/debater who selected a position and defended it against counterarguments. The dominant image was one of dialogue, but dialogue in which each person defended his or her own position. The debates, for example, ended with a tally of each side's score, not with the two sides amicably working out a middle position (though individuals might do that privately after they had heard the debates). In contrast to both these roles, Robison modeled, and expected from her students, several interrelated roles, including

- social scientist
- counselor
- mentor/friend
- the self who used professional knowledge for personal decision making

We explore the meaning of these complex, interrelated roles in two ways: through Robison's own description of her background and goals, and through Walvoord's observation of Robison's class. Robison tells her background here in her own voice:

Robison: Background and Goals

I [Robison] am by training a cognitive psychologist. I was a full-time faculty member at the College of Notre Dame from 1972 to 1982, but when we collected our data in spring, 1986, I was dividing my time between teaching and my private practice as a counseling and consulting psychologist.

In 1979, my dean supported with released time my participation in a semester-long writing-across-the-curriculum workshop where I met Walvoord, who was leader of the workshop, Breihan, who was coleader, and Anderson, the biologist whose chapter follows next. The workshop made the writing process so enjoyable and understandable that I got excited about writing and writing research, and I began using writing more effectively in my classes.

The 1986 Human Sexuality course we studied was a freshman

general studies course. It could be used by non-psychology majors to fulfill their social science requirement. During the year of our research the class had an unusual number of upper-level students because the course had not been offered the previous year while I was on leave of absence to participate in a post-doctoral program in counseling. Although the class composition changed the tone of many class discussions, I made the choice to teach the course as it had been designed—a 100-level, social science course for freshmen/sophomores.

In keeping with the college's philosophy for general education requirements, the Human Sexuality course attempted to teach students how to "think" in the discipline of the requirement—in this case, social science. Therefore, students were expected to learn something about research methodology in the social sciences while at the same time they were studying the content—human sexuality. Outcomes I valued were that students should find out how social scientists collect data and draw conclusions, and that students should learn to reason from evidence and apply principles to practical situations. Also, many of the students had both a paraprofessional interest and a personal interest in the course. That is, they might be future nurses, counselors, teachers, parents who would want to understand human sexuality for their life's work and for their own decision making.

In addition, the course number had a "6" in the middle, which was the psychology department's code for an "experiential course." All jokes aside about labs on sexuality, an experiential course meant using learning activities that involved more than lecture. I used films, small-group discussions, value clarification exercises, and so forth. In addition to the variety of activities, the course also involved writing assignments designed to provoke application of material to "real life" situations such as sexual decision making. The various experiential learning activities tended to promote a community of learners where students helped one another.

Oftentimes people remark on the curiosity of a Catholic college having a sexuality course and wonder what restrictions might be placed on content. Actually in respect to academic freedom, none were. The course was seen as a course in the psychology department that happened to study human sexual behavior. For my part, being a practicing Catholic, I tried to attend to Catholic values in the selection and presentation of topics. Not all the college's students were Catholic, but most were. I pointed out to the students that often religious groups, parents, counselors, and other well-meaning advice givers are so concerned about youth making poor sexual decisions that they are antisexual in attitude—seeing sex as an evil force that can ruin one's

life. Without being preachy, I tried to show students that it is possible to make prudent sexual decisions while still holding a positive attitude about sexuality and sex as God-given gifts to be used for good purposes. I brought in a theologian to discuss Scriptural traditions on sexuality and a physician who discussed all methods of family planning including both "natural" and "artificial" methods. Also in class I tried to take a counselor's nonjudgmental stance toward the variations and plurality of human sexuality and suggested that the students do also as they learned to model the counselor's role for the future professions in which they might use the course material.

Walvoord: A Class Discussion Illuminates Teacher and Student Roles

The interconnected roles we have mentioned—social science researcher, counselor, mentor/friend, and person who uses her professional knowledge for her own life—are evident in an excerpt from a class session that I (Walvoord) observed on March 18, about two-thirds of the way through the course.

Nearly 30 students, all women, were gathered in Knott Science Hall at the College of Notre Dame. The class opened with a review of the past week's session, when the class had been addressed by a theologian. Robison reminded them of his name, admitted he went fast and used lots of technical terminology, and answered a question about what would be on the test. As a review, she gave a quick, oral sequence of true-false questions, to which students volunteered answers. Then she picked up the major topic for that day: the stages of love.

Robison was down-to-earth, lively, and witty. At one point, discussing the early stages, she reminded her students, "Remember, St. Augustine played around a lot before he became St. Augustine." At another point, she humorously emphasized the link between in-class discussions and outside behavior: "Any questions on what we covered last time? Any of you try any outside labs?" (laughter). When she discussed the infatuation stage in which people believe they were made for each other, she did a funny little imitation of two infatuated lovers: "Golly, gee, we both wear sneakers! We're made for each other!" (more laughter).

In her use of everyday language, Robison was modeling the friend or counselor who can interpret technical material in terms that ordinary people can understand. Students picked up on this language: for example, later, in a dormitory room discussion between two students

who taped their discussion for us, the students remembered the sneakers scene and had another chuckle over it. Informal language to translate or illustrate social scientific concepts also appeared in students' writing, as we will see.

During the class session, Robison also acted as social scientist. For example, she asked, "What are the symptoms of infatuation?" (Students were to have read this section in their textbook.) One student volunteered, "You feel high." Robison built on the answer by explaining, in a more technical way, the "neurologic changes" that accompany infatuation. When students no longer volunteered, Robison turned to a more directed mode that still involved student response: she began a series of "do you" questions with "Do you think that the two of you were made for each other?" It became a kind of game, with the class laughing in self-recognition and murmuring assent.

She mentioned the aspects of infatuation and referred students to "B on your chart," a handout Robison had given the students, presenting the five stages of love. An older student leaned forward to give a copy of the handout to an oriental student who had missed some class sessions, as I later learned, because the death of her father had necessitated a return to Korea. A group of three Spanish-speaking students sitting together occasionally whispered among themselves, evidently helping one another to interpret class material.

There seemed to me to be more such personal helping in Robison's classroom than in Breihan's or Sherman's, a function perhaps of the class lab sessions with their collaborative activities, as Robison has suggested earlier, but perhaps also a function of Robison's modeling of the helpful role of friend and counselor, the service orientation of many of the students who planned to go into nursing or social service, the small size of the college, and the all-woman constitution of the college day program and of the class. The College of Notre Dame has a reputation in Baltimore for its nurturing, caring atmosphere.

In her social scientist role, Robison explained the physiological aspects of infatuation, presenting the results of research. A student asked, "Why does this [the release of endorphins/endorphins] happen when you're infatuated?" Robison replied, "Yes" and grinned, stonewalling to illustrate the lack of knowledge about that issue among experts (laughter). Later, another student asked a scientific question: "Is it, like, egg first or chicken first?" In other words, do you fall in love because you're secreting endorphins or do you secrete the hormones because you're falling in love? Robison replied in scientific terms: "I think, from the way I read the literature, that [summarizes the literature] . . . but that's only a nice little hypothesis." Now Robison

invited students to become social science researchers: "How would you design such a study?" [i.e., to determine whether hormonal secretion comes first or infatuation comes first]. Students volunteered their ideas.

In addition to the social scientist role in this discussion, Robison adopted a mentor role: "You'll fall in love often throughout your life, while you're single and while you're married—maybe with your husband, maybe with others."

So far in this discussion, she had made four references to clients; her role as counseling psychologist was highly visible.

By occasional references to her own personal experience, Robison reflected herself as a person who used social science knowledge to understand and shape her own life. By sharing such experience with her students, she assumed the role of an older or more experienced mentor or friend. At one point, discussing how people approach commitment warily, she said, "I'm almost ready to say I love you"—that was my husband's phrase after we'd been going together for awhile."

Robison invited students to test theory, hypothesis, or Robison's views against *their* experience. They were to be skeptical, as research-scientists-in-training, and also they were to expect social science to impact directly on their personal lives. The class was discussing what Robison called the "wildcard approach" that occurs during infatuation, where the newly beloved is merely a wild card who is created in the mind of the lover according to the lover's fantasy.

An African American woman challenged her: "Women, not men, use the wildcard approach?"

Robison replied, "That's one view—is your experience different?"

It was, and the student said so, drawing on her four years in the army and her experience with "those guys."

Robison offered a different explanation for the soldiers' behavior.

Another student disagreed.

Still another student entered the fray.

We might compare this exchange among upper-level students to the multistudent exchanges that Breihan orchestrated among his freshmen, which were much more carefully controlled, with a single role being modeled: the historian showing students how to argue and present evidence in the ways that historians do. In Robison's class, however, the discussion was much looser: students entered and exited from it more freely, there was more private whispering among them as they voiced their own reactions to neighbors in the classroom, personal

experience seemed more highly privileged, and both the teacher and the students played a wider variety of roles in the discussion.

The value that Robison placed on personal and social goals is revealed in her pleasure over the following incident: A client in her private practice was having difficulties that affected the client's job performance, so the client talked with her colleagues, explaining that she was working with "Dr. Robison" and was improving. Her colleagues were supportive. One of them came to the client after the group conversation and said, "I graduated from the College of Notre Dame and I had Dr. Robison for Human Sexuality class. When you see her, tell her I said 'Hi,' and tell her I've used what she taught us in my own marriage, and I'm very happy." Robison was pleased both that the former student had used the course for her own life and also that she had been a sympathetic coworker to someone in emotional difficulty.

Sensing this goal of personal application, which they shared with their teacher, students commented in their final evaluations of the course about the fulfillment of that goal with statements such as:

Now I have much more information and am able to make more sound choices.

I have more info that I previously did not have. And, I have thought about my beliefs and values a great deal. I am more comfortable with my own sexuality. Negative thoughts have been dispelled. This course has had a very positive effect on my personal and professional life. It was GREAT!

In contrast, then, to Sherman's and Breihan's classes at Loyola College, Robison's Human Sexuality class at the College of Notre Dame modeled and encouraged four interrelated roles: social scientist, counselor, mentor/friend, and self who uses professional knowledge for personal decision making. Robison, as we will see, encouraged her students to adopt these roles in their written assignments.

ROBISON'S EXPECTATIONS

Unlike Breihan's and Sherman's classes, where Walvoord and the teacher collected data over the entire semester, in Robison's class we chose only one assignment for data collection: the students' last writing assignment before their exam—a letter to a friend who is about to marry, advising him or her "how to have a good marital sex life."

To describe her expectations to the students, Robison gave them an

assignment sheet (Figure 5.1) that followed the CRAFT formula (Criteria, Role, Audience, Form, Theme). She had devised this formula as a guide for teachers in constructing assignments (Robison, 1983).

The criteria spelled out on the assignment sheet were repeated both in the peer review sheet (Figure 5.2) that guided both students' in-class peer response to one another's handwritten drafts, and in the teacher response sheet Robison used for her comments on students' typed drafts and final papers. She awarded points under each category of the criteria listed on the teacher response sheet, and also wrote comments.

In addition to the expectations listed on the sheets, other expectations,

Criteria	Points
Organizational structure	10
Outside reference	3
Selection of relevant material	7
Accurate information	10
Mechanics—spelling, punctuation, grammar, clarity	5

Role: A friend has written you about her up-and-coming wedding. She knows that you have taken a human sexuality course and has asked you for any advice you might give for her and her husband to have a good sex life in their marriage.

Audience: Imagine someone that is a friend similar to you. You might even imagine writing to a real friend. Assume the friend has any characteristics that you want in the way of educational background, religion, etc. as long as these assumptions are clear to a reader (e.g., "Now, Mary, I know that since you and Fred are both Catholic. . ."). The tone of the letter can be casual like you would use to a friend but should still include academic technical material.

Form: A letter, obviously, but may have sections with headings for easier reading. This assignment can probably be done in 3–4 pages.

Theme: You may select any topics from the course, both from the book or lectures or classroom exercises. Please include one outside source (magazine, journal, or book). Be sure to reference it properly at the end of the assignment. Use whatever referencing form you have used in your major (APA, MLA, etc.). Organize the material any way you wish but try to have an organizational scheme that is obvious and logical to a reader.

Due

April 15	Peer review in class
April 22	Draft due in class (5 points off for not being handed in during class)
April 29	Returned to you
May 6	Rewrites due in class

Figure 5.1. Robison's letter assignment.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the paper well organized? Outline a few of the main points. What would you suggest? 2. Is the material selected accurate and relevant? How could it be more so? 3. Did the author use an outside reference? 4. Are mechanics OK? Any suggestions?
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Figure 5.2. Robison's Peer Review Sheet.

which had been tacit, emerged after the course was over, as we constructed the primary trait scale (p. 35), analyzed Robison's comments on the papers, and conducted other forms of analysis described in Chapter 2. We then added the following expectations to the ones Robison had stated on her assignment sheet:

When presenting research results, the student:

- (a) describes characteristics of the research (method, population, etc.)
- (b) presents data in precise terms (i.e., 38% not "some")
- (c) gives operational definitions

The student articulates at least three counterarguments or views of opponents

The student uses social science terminology and is careful to define and translate for the lay reader.

Our post-course analysis of Robison's additional expectations would lead, in a future semester, to an amplification and revision of the criteria on the assignment sheet, peer review sheet, and teacher response sheet.

Our analysis of Robison's explicit and tacit expectations showed us that her letter assignment cast students into a combination of the four interrelated roles we saw reflected in the in-class discussion: social-scientist-in-training, counselor-in-training, mentor/friend, and self who applies course knowledge to personal decisions. Students were expected to report social science research accurately and in a scholarly way. As counselors they were to choose and translate research for the needs of the client, while also maintaining the tone and closeness of a friendship. Because the assignment suggested that students choose a friend "similar to you," there was also a hint of the role of the self who uses social science for personal decisions.

The rest of this chapter is an exploration of the difficulties that students encountered in the letter assignment and our insights about

how students' strategies and the teacher's methods affected the difficulties. Particularly, we explore those areas of difficulty that were most influenced by the varied and complex roles that Robison modeled and expected of her students:

1. Constructing the audience and the self
2. Stating a position
3. Managing complexity
4. Using appropriate discipline-based methods to arrive at and support a position

DIFFICULTIES WITH CONSTRUCTING THE AUDIENCE AND THE SELF

THE NATURE OF THE DIFFICULTIES

In three of the four classrooms the team studied, teachers asked students to address a peer audience; Robison's letter to a friend was one. Sherman and Walvoord maintained that assigning a peer audience for students is not an "act of hostility" as Bartholomae (1985) suggests (p. 70), but rather a potentially good idea that can easily cause many difficulties for students if it is not handled well. Robison and Walvoord, in this chapter, concur. Robison's goal in asking students to write to a friend was to place her students in a social-scientist/counselor/mentor-friend relationship that she considered excellent training for the roles they would assume once they graduated. But as in Sherman's class, the peer audience could cause difficulties. Robison's students fell short of her expectations when they:

1. ignored the peer audience and adopted the role of text processor addressing teacher checking textbook knowledge
2. adopted a layperson role rather than the appropriate professional-in-training role.

The first difficulty is illustrated by Sharon Enders's letter, which fails to meet Robison's expectations because it delineates the recipient only minimally, and it primarily adopts the text-processor role:

Sharon Enders: Brief, minimal delineation of letter recipient

Dear Jane,

You expressed to me that you are concerned about a good sex life in your marriage. I would like to tell you some of the information that I have received in my sexuality course because we have just completed a section on marriage and sex.

[The rest of the letter presents information from the course but does not further delineate any of Jane's characteristics and makes no mention of her except occasionally to insert "Jane" as direct address ("Jane, we have learned in our sexuality class that communication is very important.")]

Contrast Enders's letter with the more successful self and audience in the next two letters where the writer delineates the reader more fully and establishes a relationship between herself and her friend. The relationships retain some of the equality of a friendship but yet give to the writers some basis for an expert stance from which to meet Robison's expectations for transmission of course-related learning.

Danielle Voorhees: Full delineation of letter recipient

Dear Kelly,

I can't believe that you are getting married in only three months! I can remember when we were kids talking about our "future" husbands, and now its really true for both of us. Your letter sure expresses your happinesses and not to mention a hint of "cold feet." Marriage is a big step and commitment in one's life. I know that you and Dwayne want a good marriage, who doesn't? The last time I talked to you I got the impression that you feel that your marriage will be as exciting as your engagement. I know, there is nothing like sneaking around to make love without either of your parents catching you. But I got some information about marriage that might interest you.

[The next section is angled toward helping the letter recipient overcome her misguided notion that the marriage will be as exciting as the engagement. The rest of the letter integrates more details about the letter recipient and chooses course material to address those characteristics.]

Lei Kung: Full delineation of letter recipient

Reyna:

Hi! How are you? Gathering from your latest news, you're probably riding on cloud nine. Tell me, how did you make him propose to you, after all these years? Anyhow, congratulations!! Mike is a good man and I know you'll be happy together. Did you set the date, yet? We'll have a blast picking out wedding gowns, flowers, and all that good stuff! I know this gown shop called the Buckener's, they design beautiful gowns and they're really reasonable with their prices or we could head to N. Y. and visit the bride gown shows during June. I can't wait.

Yes, I agree with you hundred percent; marriage is a big step and I do sympathize with you for being nervous and unsure. I felt that way when Keith asked me to marry him. At first, I was so excited, all I could think was I finally have him; he's all mine and I realized I wasn't thinking sensibly. After a while, however, I knew I really didn't love him enough to jump into bed with

him for life, so I told him I wasn't ready, yet and he's still being very patient.

Just look at me, at the time when you most need me, here I am blabbing on about nothing but nonsense. Well, I did read the letter you mailed me, very carefully and I think you're kind of scared of marrying Mike, are you? Is that why you asked me about my experiences with Keith and my Human Sexuality course? I knew the course would come in handy some day!

To be honest with you, this course is really helpful. It's a lot different than the health courses we took in high school (Remember Ms. Lamb, the old horny lass?) This course goes more in depth and because I'm a little more experienced, I understand it clearly and can discuss sex objectively. So, what I'll be telling you isn't biased opinions, but facts and my true experiences in breathless details!!!

[The next section helps the letter recipient in working through her questions about whether Mike is the right person to marry, and then allaying her fears about marriage.]

Voorhees and Kung avoided the text-processor role and fully delineated a letter recipient. Students who did so sometimes disappointed Robison's expectations because they delineated the "self" merely as layperson and friend, not as social scientist/counselor-in-training.

TEACHERS' METHODS AND STUDENTS' STRATEGIES

Idea-Generating Strategies

Idea Generating and Students' Roles

Students who delineated the letter recipient only minimally and who adopted the text-processor role typically copied the letter formula from the "role" section of the assignment sheet, as Enders did in the first letter opening above. They swiftly gave the recipient a name, and then launched quickly into the body of the paper, perhaps giving a nod to the letter format by sprinkling the person's name in direct address throughout the letter ("Celia, there are four basic positions for intercourse. . ."). The letter format served as a minimal device to frame the course material taken, often with considerable care, from the textbook and class notes. One such student said on her think-aloud tape, "God, this sounds like a term paper, not a letter," but didn't do anything about that problem.

Students who delineated the letter recipient more fully generated their ideas very differently. Their first concern in beginning the papers was to delineate the letter recipient. They typically spent a good deal

of time thinking about who the letter recipient would be, pondering, rejecting, and choosing characteristics, then spent considerable time drafting the first few paragraphs, in which the letter recipient's characteristics and the relationship between the letter recipient and the writer were established. As in Voorhees's and Kung's letter openings reprinted earlier, these writers tended to integrate throughout the letter specific information about the letter recipient and to angle their advice toward the letter recipient's situation. Such letters also typically included shared remembrances that further defined the letter recipient and the writer's relationship to him or her (all students were women, and all but one delineated the letter recipient as a woman). One said in exasperation, "This sounds stupid," and she scrapped the draft and began again.

The Webbing Technique: Strengths and Weaknesses

Robison's early in-class exercise, designed to help students with idea generation, sent a mixed message to students about the two kinds of idea-generating processes we have described. She began the class session by explaining the "web," an early planning device shaped like a spider's web, which the writer can use to generate ideas and to begin organizing them. Then she wrote "marital sexuality" in a circle in the middle of the board and asked students to call out topics for the branches of the web. To do this, students worked from their class notes, textbooks, and memories of class discussions and readings. Once the blackboard web was developed, Robison asked students to construct webs of their own at their desks. The in-class blackboard web is shown in Figure 5.3.

A web is often recommended in textbooks on writing and in writing-across-the-curriculum workshops. Discussions of webs usually point out that they are not so rigidly linear as an outline, and thus are easier and more flexible for early planning. In the context of Robison's class, however, other characteristics and functions of the web, as she used it, became apparent. First, by its emphasis upon generating large amounts of material from course readings and lecture notes, the web reflected the high value that Robison, as reader of the students' papers, placed on using course material. Second, the web also demonstrated the teacher's interest in students' planning and composing procedures, and it forced an early start on thinking about what to include in the paper.

The webbing technique was new to almost all the students. Two mentioned in their logs or tapes that they found the webbing technique

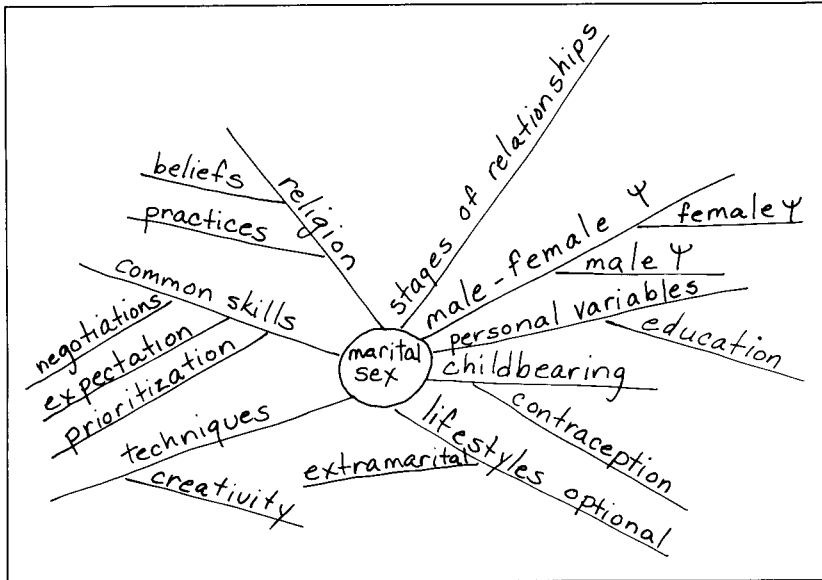


Figure 5.3. In-class web constructed by Robison from student input.

a useful new idea, which they would use in other settings. Several others made their own second, or revised, webs for their letters. Many students worked from their webs, often writing numbers beside the various points to indicate a position in the planned letter, thus making the web into a kind of outline.

However, our analysis showed us that the web actually modeled the idea-generating process of a text-processing student, and not that of a student who more fully delineated the letter recipient. The in-class web worked directly from class and lecture notes without reference to a letter recipient.

Our insight into the function of the web exercise is parallel to our insight into the structure of the in-class discussions in Sherman's class (p. 83). Both encouraged a writing process that the teacher did not want, or omitted a part of the writing and thinking process that the teacher considered important. The web exercise was useful in emphasizing both the composing process itself and Robison's expectation that students would use a range of course material in their papers. In another semester, however, she might also include an early exercise for delineating a letter recipient and some discussion of how to choose course material for the letter recipient's needs. She might model two webs—each for a different type of letter recipient.

For the remainder of this section on constructing the audience and the self, we focus on the students who fully delineated the letter recipient, and in so doing met the challenge of also adopting the social-scientist/counselor/friend role by constructing a self who was appropriately expert vis-à-vis the letter recipient. This made it possible to include the social science course material that Robison expected them to learn and use. To create the expert self, students drew upon familiar models from their own experiences of passing information to peers, but they also had to go beyond that to construct in the letter a self who was more consistently the expert than their peer experience normally allowed.

Students' Use of Models from Other Settings

We saw one model for passing information to peers that was useful but not sufficient for students' letters.

Connie Hatch composes her letter in the dorm with her roommate, who is not in the Human Sexuality class, sitting nearby. On the tape, they get into several conversations as Hatch works on the paper. In one conversation about birth control, they discuss a mutual friend who is using withdrawal, and then discuss the roommate's mother, who has used the rhythm method and talked to her about it. Hatch, adopting the information-giving role, now mentions the other methods covered in their text. The roommate has never heard of a diaphragm, so Hatch shows her the picture of one in her textbook, to which the roommate exclaims, "That big thing? How do you get it in?" leading Hatch to explain that it folds up and that you put lubricating jelly on it.

In this conversation, a level of information-giving takes place that is useful—but not sufficient—as a model for the letter assignment. Between Hatch and her roommate, no direct advice is given. Further, despite the fact that Hatch has had the Human Sexuality course, the role of "expert" shifts back and forth between her and her roommate on the basis of two elements: personal experience and contact with others who rank as "experts" in some way. For example, when the subject of the Pill is raised, the roommate recounts her own experience of having forgotten to take her birth control pill, taken two the next day, and then asking a doctor whether that had been a good idea. At this point, because of her personal experience with a problem and the answer she learned from an expert, the roommate is the expert.

The assignment sheet's suggestion, then, that the student writer

offer the letter recipient “technical information” seems consonant with a common, relatively easy mode of interaction between peers. What is perhaps not so common is for the letter writer *consistently* to maintain the information- and advice-giving role of the expert. How students did that is the subject of the next sections.

Robison's Language on the Assignment Sheet

The assignment sheet, reproduced earlier in this chapter, did several things that appeared to help students create the “expert” self:

1. It mentioned “role” and “audience” specifically.
2. It conveyed that one might “imagine” a “real” friend, thus indicating the mixture of the real and the created that we found was necessary for success in the letter.
3. It gave explicit instruction and a sample of the language that would be needed to make the characteristics of the friend clear to Robison. Because of Robison as the other reader, students could not merely write as they would in a letter to a peer, but would have to use some techniques of the epistolary novel.
4. It suggested a basis for the writer to create herself as “expert”—the friend is embarking on a new path; the friend has written to ask advice; the writer has taken the Human Sexuality course.

We saw many students directly using Robison's language on the assignment sheet. They thought about real friends but combined real and imaginary traits; they used language that revealed the letter recipient's traits to Robison; they referred to the friend's earlier letter asking for advice.

Strategies for Strengthening the Expert Stance of the Writer

The high-success students (p. 36) went beyond the assignment sheet's formula and beyond their own familiar experience to strengthen their expert status vis-à-vis the letter recipient, so that they could assume the counselor role and could meet Robison's expectations for presentation of course-related learning. They created the expert self in three ways: (1) by citing personal experience, (2) by creating an approximation of the counselor's role, and (3) by delineating a letter recipient who needed their help.

One way students added strength to their expert roles was by citing their own personal experience—a factor that helped establish the expert role in their normal peer relationships, as illustrated by the Hatch-roommate dormitory discussion. For example, Kung, the writer of the letter opening reprinted earlier, cites her own experiences on the path toward marriage that her friend is now traveling, and promises “facts and my true experiences in breathless details!!!”

Other students enhanced their expert status by adopting approximations of the psychologist’s counseling role. Kung jokes later in her letter (in a part not reprinted in this chapter) that her friend should pay her for her expertise. On her think-aloud tape, she voices, “Who gives free counseling?” but says she can’t spell “counseling,” so decides to write, “who gives free advise? [*sic*]” Another version of the clinical psychologist’s role occurs in another student’s paper as the student establishes herself as a protégée of Dr. Ruth, a popular media psychologist. This student writes in her letter that if the friend has questions beyond what the writer can answer, the writer can arrange for the friend to talk directly to Dr. Ruth. The student adopts the role of counselor-in-training with privileged access to the certified counselor.

In addition to these two ways of creating the self to enhance expert status, high-success students created the letter recipient so as to enhance their own expert status. The typical opening strategy of students who delineated the letter recipient fully was mentally to run through their real friends. One student wrote in her log, “I went through all my friends who are about to get married.” Another student rejected a friend because the friend was too knowledgeable, remarking wryly on her think-aloud tape, “She should be telling me!” The letter recipient, then, had to be needy in some way, so as to justify the expert stance of the writer.

One strategy for establishing the reader’s need for advice and the writer’s consistent expert stance was to posit a misguided (rather than merely ignorant) reader, as does Danielle Voorhees in the letter opening reprinted earlier, who addressed someone who expects marriage to be as exciting as engagement.

Danger may be a friend or counselor’s basis for a more authoritarian stance than normal. One student achieves such a stance in part of her paper by positing a reader who is using the Pill, despite the fact that she is a smoker. The letter writer, assuming a strong advice-giving stance, earnestly warns about the dangers, advises her friend to go off the Pill, and recommends several other possible contraceptive methods, elaborating on the pros and cons of each. This strategy allows the

writer nicely to meet Robison's expectations for discussion of alternatives and counterarguments.

Some students posited a reader who had heard wrong or bad advice, or had been given inappropriate models by others—again allowing a strong counselor stance and the incorporation of counterarguments. One student writes about the inappropriate models presented by friends and the inappropriate advice from mothers that she and the letter recipient have experienced:

You and I both know the success rate of our friends and their marriages—you know—the success rate that is non-existent. Funny how all of their marriages fell apart or ended due to outside lovers. Actually, it's not funny at all—so let's get down to some serious business, girlfriend.

[and later in the letter:]

You and I both had mothers who did not let the word sex come out of their mouths, except to tell us that all men were after only one thing . . .

Though the writer above establishes the recipient's misinformation as the basis of her expert stance, she also maintains a peer relationship by characterizing herself as also formerly misinformed. Such strategies for maintaining the "friend" relationships despite the expert stance are common in the letters.

Students occasionally posited a reader who might in the future make a wrong move. One writer warns her friend against extramarital affairs, discussing the kind of damage that affairs can do, and invoking the church's teaching. The danger of an affair provides the basis for a strong stance on the letter writer's part.

Another type of recipient is the one who has a difficult decision or path ahead. For example, the note of doubt introduced in Lei Kung's letter opener is followed by a long passage in which Kung urges her friend to ask, "Are you really in love?" and takes her friend through some of the moves necessary to decide whether or not to marry (despite the fact that the assignment sheet suggests a friend who has already made that decision). One Spanish-speaking student posits a reader who has gotten pregnant unintentionally and has decided to marry the father of the baby rather than have an abortion (adoption is not mentioned). Her letter assumes that the couple is not necessarily well suited or in love, and may have difficulty establishing a healthy relationship after a less than ideal start. Another Hispanic student posits a reader who is about to marry a middle-Eastern Muslim and will face significant cross-cultural adjustment between his assumptions and her own Hispanic Catholic upbringing.

The one Asian and the four Hispanic students in the class were the ones who most frequently posited some sort of difficult decision or path, perhaps because they found the whole issue of entering marriage difficult, due to cross-cultural conflicts. Robison notes that Hispanic and African American students typically enrolled in her class in disproportionate numbers. Her contacts with them as they sought her out after class or in her office, and the information they revealed through their writing and in-class contributions, led her to believe that a large part of their motivation for enrolling in the class was to get a handle on the problems of courtship and marriage as people whose cultural background was different from the mainstream. It may be that assignments that raise issues of cross-cultural differences, even obliquely, will be treated in a significantly different fashion by students who are dealing in their own lives with cultural differences.

In summary, then, successful students in Robison's class had to build a consistent role of "expert" that was in some ways like their familiar roles, but in some ways different. Robison's suggestion in the assignment sheet that they posit themselves as someone who had taken the course and whose friend had asked for advice seemed genuinely helpful, and virtually all students used it to help them construct the self as expert. Some students, however, used additional strategies to further strengthen their expert status. They:

- used personal experience as a further basis for expertise
- added a counselor-like role for themselves
- posited a reader who was needy because she:
 - was misguided
 - was in danger
 - had had wrong information or model
 - might make a wrong move in the future
 - faced a difficult decision or path

These strategies were strong because they retained the peer-to-peer "friend" situation the assignment specified, yet helped the writer develop a strong, consistent "expert" voice that allowed the student more naturally to incorporate the amount and complexity of social scientific information and the counselor-like stance that Robison expected. Once we saw these strategies that high-success students used, Robison could, in later semesters, deliberately suggest them to all her students.

Strategies for Achieving an Appropriate Tone

Rightly predicting that students would have difficulties with tone, Robison addressed the issue in her assignment sheet by suggesting that "The tone of the letter can be casual like you would use to a friend but should still include academic technical material."

In doing the primary trait analysis, we realized that one of Robison's ways of recognizing the academic course material was through vocabulary. Successful students combined technical information and vocabulary on, say, the stages of sexual arousal, but translated the information for the lay recipient of the letter and also set the technical material within a context of casual, informal address. Thus Robison's suggestion that a casual tone be combined with technical material gives a hint in the right direction, and some students did it very successfully. Here is a letter that, in Robison's judgment, successfully combines material from class notes and textbook with direct address, a conversational tone, translation of technical terms, and reference to both the writer's and the reader's experience. The writer, Danielle Voorhees, has already established a misguided letter recipient who thinks marriage will be as exciting as courtship (p. 154). The excerpt here begins soon after that opening paragraph:

Now back to all that love making that you are expecting. According to Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), the average American couple makes love about two or three times per week when they are in their twenties. Statistics show that 45% of married couples who have been together for 2 years or less engage in intercourse 3 times a week or more. At 2 to 10 years together, only 27% engaged in intercourse 3 times or more a week but, the majority of couples in this range engaged in coitus 1 to 3 times per week. Well, Kel, it looks like there is a possibility that sex during marriage is not going to happen every night like you and Dwayne have planned. Although, it could happen often if your make sex one of your priorities and not just something that is done late at night once you have come home from work, cooked, cleaned, and put the kids to bed. During a lecture, my instructor mentioned that couples tend to get into a "rut" with their sex lives because they don't make sex important, they just "do it" at a set time, same place, and use the same techniques.

Voorhees refers to Robison's in-class language. In fact, her own language in this letter is in some ways similar to the combination of scientific and conversational language that Robison used in class.

Though Voorhees achieved a successful tone, many students struggled to do so. Lei Kung, after rereading a draft of her opening paragraphs, told herself:

Unh unh, that's stupid. I should start all over again. Stop thinking that this is an assignment and just write to Reyna like I'm writing to a friend—like I always write to her.

Other students also remarked that a letter draft sounded “stupid,” or “like a term paper, not like a letter.” In their peer reviews, the issue of whether the paper “sounds like a letter” also came up frequently, even though it was not included on the Peer Review sheet. For example, one student praised another: “It sounds like something I would pick up and read from you.”

Students often did not know how to revise a paper that seemed to have the wrong tone. After her sentence about the letter sounding “stupid,” and the resolution to write to Reyna as always, Kung abandoned her draft and began again with a different tone: “Dear Reyna, Hey, what's up? Long time no see.”

But her new draft lacked the content and substance the teacher would expect: forgetting that the letter was an assignment placed her in an inappropriate layperson role. She abandoned the new “Hey, what's up?” draft and returned to the “stupid” one, which she changed very little (pp. 154–155). In Robison's judgment Kung's letter achieved a successful tone, but clearly students could not simply use the tone they normally used in letter-writing to their friends, but had to construct a tone for the assignment—a tone that often seemed “stupid” or difficult to achieve.

One student who achieved a successful tone that was among the most informal in the class, yet still had the substance Robison expected, talked her letter onto the tape as though talking to a friend and then typed from the tape with only surface changes. She thus used our research device directly as a composing tool to help her solve the problem of tone. Nonetheless, she, too, struggled with issues of tone, remarking at one point about her draft, “This is stupid.” She made some changes, too, in honor of the teacher-reader and the letter's status as an assignment: for example, the letter as talked on the tape is free of four-letter words, though this African American student sometimes used such words in class discussions and presumably would also use them in a letter to a friend. She formalized the tone still more as she wrote from her spoken, taped draft, for example changing “whore” on the tape to “prostitute” in the written final copy.

Tone was thus a significant difficulty for Robison's students. In a future semester, Robison decided, she could give examples of the tone she considered appropriate for the letter, analysis of how successful writers achieved that tone, and some process suggestions such as talking the letter aloud onto a tape.

Thus the letter format, which seemed, on the face of it, an easy format in which to ask students to write, in fact imposed some difficulties because it was actually a hybrid form that had to sound something like a letter to a friend yet adopt the counselor-in-training role and meet the academic expectations of the teacher. Students' difficulties lay in combining the characteristics of each, particularly in transcending a textbook-processor approach in order to fully delineate and address the letter recipient, maintaining a consistent "expert" self in the letter, and achieving an appropriate tone that fit the letter recipient yet also served the expectations of the teacher for technical information and vocabulary. Yet Robison viewed these as tasks both necessary to the future roles her students would have to play and akin to the roles she herself played as she translated and shaped social science information for clients and students, addressing them in friendly, helpful ways with an informal tone, yet offering them substantive social scientific information and a counselor's help. Through our study, she learned more about her students' difficulties and about how her teaching methods were working or might be improved.

THREE INTERRELATED DIFFICULTIES: STATING A POSITION; USING DISCIPLINE-BASED METHODS TO ARRIVE AT (AND SUPPORT) A POSITION; MANAGING COMPLEXITY

Three other interconnected areas of difficulty were heavily influenced by the different roles that Robison modeled and expected from her students: stating a position, using discipline-based methods to arrive at and support a position, and managing complexity. As a basis for our discussion, we first explore the nature of good/better/best reasoning in Robison's class as compared to Sherman's and Breihan's classes.

We have noted that in all four classes we studied, students had to perform the five tasks of good/better/best reasoning (p. 12). However, the classes differed in emphasis. In Sherman's and Breihan's classes, the student decision maker or arguer performed all five tasks. In Robison's assignment, however, the student as social scientist/counselor/friend concentrated on Task 2, choosing information and analysis according to the needs of the client, leaving the definition of "good" (Task 1) and the decision making (Tasks 3-5) in the hands of the client. In response to the friend's request for advice, when following the roles Robison modeled in the classroom, the writer might:

1. Describe the central issues or points of concern that ought to be considered in shaping a good marital sex life.
2. State general principles that have been shown to be helpful (e.g., when conflict arises, share thoughts with your partner in a negotiating mode).
3. Under each issue, present alternatives (e.g., there are several modes of contraception).
4. Discuss consequences and outcomes of various alternatives.
5. Provide technical information or research results needed for good decision making (e.g., the failure rates of each form of contraception).
6. Discuss the decision-making process.
7. Give direct "you should" advice only in cases of danger.

In Sherman's class, decision makers managed complexity by considering alternatives and counterarguments before making a decision; in Breihan's class by defending their positions against counterarguers. In Robison's class, the counselor was expected to manage complexity by choosing and interpreting social scientific information germane to the client's needs, and by sensitively facilitating the client's decision making.

Figure 5.4 shows Sherman's, Breihan's, and Robison's models for good/better/best reasoning.

Robison's model is a version of Sherman's define/analyze/prescribe, but with the writer playing a counseling, not a decision-making, role. To "take a position" in Robison's class, then, meant to define one's client and one's relationship to the client, offering *appropriate* help to the client's decision-making process. It follows, then, that the text-processor students who delineated a letter recipient only minimally could not arrive at a position, in Robison's sense, because they had

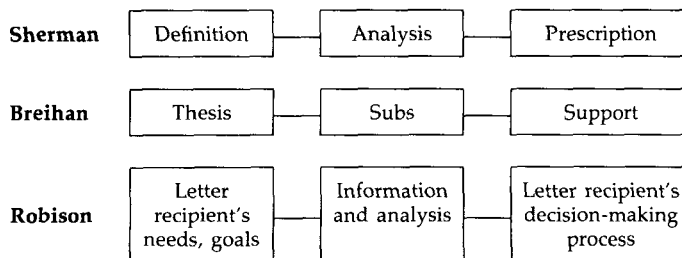


Figure 5.4. Sherman's, Breihan's, and Robison's models for good/better/best reasoning.

no reader characteristics, needs, and goals to determine what information and analysis should be offered. But other students who *did* fully delineate a letter recipient nonetheless had difficulties defining their own positions, supporting them, and managing complexity as Robison had expected. These students sometimes failed to meet Robison's expectations in two ways:

1. Abdicating their responsibility to guide and counsel the client/friend.
2. Not including enough specific, course-related, social science information to meet Robison's expectations.

We will explore these more fully as we discuss how students' strategies and Robison's methods influenced them.

TEACHER'S METHODS AND STUDENTS' STRATEGIES

Strategies That Circumvented Complexity

Students used three strategies that prevented them from establishing an appropriate counselor position, using the methods of the discipline, and managing complexity as Robison expected.

1. *Positing the letter recipient who has already made a decision.* One student writes, "Since you and Jim are interested in having children you would want to know when is the best time to have intercourse to increase your chances of conception." She then presents the basal temperature method as a way of increasing chances for conception, not mentioning its contraceptive function or allowing the possibility that the letter recipient would even face the question of contraception. By so doing, she limits her ability to represent the complexity of the issues and the alternatives the class has studied.

2. *Making the decision for the reader.* One student, instead of presenting options, writes, "Since you and Francis don't want children right away, I think you should know something about the birth control pill." She follows this with a discussion of how the Pill works, its failure rate, and its side effects, but she does not present alternative methods of birth control. Rather, she limits herself to the reasons why her friend may safely use the Pill: "for healthy women like you, it is [an] extremely effective, safe means of contraception."

3. *Shifting responsibility inappropriately to another expert.* In the same letter quoted above, consideration of other birth control methods is

shifted to an expert, as the student writer advises the letter recipient to see a doctor for further questions.

In contrast to these three strategies, more successful students constructed a reader whose needs led the writer to present the pros and cons of a number of birth control methods, discussing their moral and religious as well as medical implications, using material taken from class notes, and *then* suggesting that the friend consult a doctor for specific medical examination and advice before making a final decision. Sometimes such high-success students would also add advice about the decision-making process. After a condensed but informative review of contraception, one student advises her reader:

This is just a briefing more or less about certain contraceptives. I encourage you to check other forms. Shop around for what you think is best for the two of you. You wouldn't buy the first car you test drive until you've had some chance to browse. The same goes with a contraceptive. Some forms have more risks than others. Weigh them out before making a final decision.

Though the assignment sheet gave some good advice about how to adopt the counselor position vis-à-vis the letter recipient, clearly the task was complex, and students might have benefited from some examples and instruction regarding the ways in which they could define their positions and their readers so as to take an appropriate counselor role and to include the course-related learning that Robison expected.

PRE-DRAFT WRITING

In Sherman's and Breihan's classes, students' ability to use the methods of the discipline to arrive at and support their positions seemed related to their pre-draft writing (i.e., any writing that precedes the first draft of two-thirds of what the student intends to be the paper). For example, we noted that students who achieved success on Sherman's McDonald's-Popeye's paper took notes *at* the fast-food restaurants rather than later or not at all. Likewise, we noted the functions of pre-draft writing for Breihan's students, as they learned to create dialogue between argument and counterargument. Similarly, in Robison's class, students' ability to use the findings of social science seemed related to their pre-draft writing.

In Robison's class one aspect was whether or not the student took

full class notes. Consider this very minimal paragraph on the stages of love from a low-success letter by Sharon Enders:

It is also important to remember that there are stages in a marriage. You and Bob will not always be as happy with each other as you are right now and that this is normal in a relationship. There will be periods of disillusionment all through your marriage but they will pass and soon you and Bob will be getting along again.

We do not have Enders's notes on the stages of love, but we do have some of her other class notes. Here is a sample:

4/8

Unit IV

how mind/psyche interacts w/ body?

4 main emotional disturbances

depression

anxiety

anger

guilt

1. Intellectual insight

2. Practice

3. Cognitive/emotional dissonance head and gut split

4. Emotional Insight

5. Personality change

Premarital Sex

sexual rev.—in females having pre-marital sex

'48 53

'74

Kinsey

Hunt

[male sign] 71% 97%

[female sign] 33% 70%

increase use of contraception

age of marr. up—puberty age down

women's movement

A student with such minimal notes in a course that the teacher described in an interview as "80 percent notes, 20 percent textbook" is in trouble. She has no way to easily access information, to classify information, to get details about her topics, or to see the organizational headings for material. She's left with fragmentary, undifferentiated notes that are too thin to be the basis for a letter that presents specific, detailed information to the recipient.

Using Notes While Composing

In addition to creating appropriate pre-draft writing, successful students used their textbooks and class notes directly as they composed. Less

successful students did not use their sources; rather, they relied on a composing process that was like the normal friendly letter—composed without direct reference to sources (Figure 5.5).

An example of a successful student is Connie Hatch, whom we have seen in dialogue with her roommate as Hatch planned and composed her letter. To plan the letter, Hatch began by fully and carefully delineating her letter recipient. Then she flipped through all her textbook chapters and class notes for the semester, considering each topic, including or rejecting it on the basis of whether it fit the letter recipient. This strategy helped her do what was difficult for Sherman's and Breihan's students as well as Robison's—bring information about the options into disciplined relationship with the definition of "good" (here, with the characteristics of the letter recipient) so that a single decision could be made—reasoning Task 3. Further, her strategy helped Hatch include specific social scientific information because, when she decided to include a topic, she had her textbook and notes right there.

In contrast, a less successful student did not begin by delineating a reader, but rather by deciding to use only a certain section of her textbook; she did not look over or consider other sections; her letter disappointed Robison's expectations for selection of a breadth of information related to the letter recipient's needs. Still other students, as we have said, did not have specific notes or did not consult them while composing the letter.

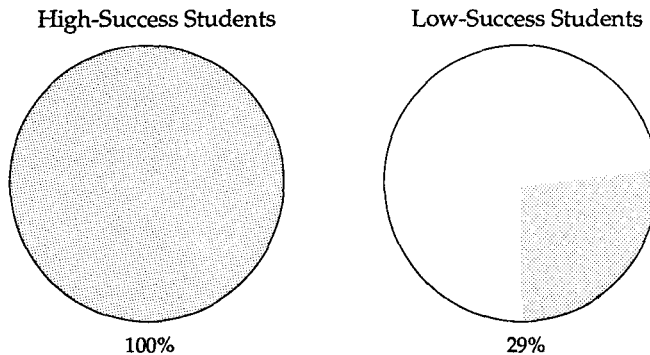


Figure 5.5. Percentage of high-success and low-success students who composed directly from class notes. $N =$ the 7 lowest-success and 6 highest-success students. "Success" refers to paper grade during the course and score on the post-course primary trait analysis (p. 35). Evidence is based on think-aloud tapes or, in the case of three low-success students who did not tape their drafting or mention in the log that they used class notes, on evidence from the drafts.

RESPONSES TO DRAFTS

One teaching method Robison had instituted after the writing-across-the-curriculum workshop was draft response, both by peers and by herself. These responses required class time for peer review and Robison's time, outside of class, to write comments on the drafts. Like Sherman and Breihan, Robison also asked during our study, "Was draft response worth it?"

Successful Peer Response and Revision

The student Alice Smith illustrates peer response that worked well. During the in-class, think-aloud training session (p. 28) before beginning the letter assignment, Smith described her "usual" composing process: "When I begin the initial writing I usually start and finish (including typing) in the same night." Peer response changed that pattern and helped Smith substantially improve her paper. In class, Smith's peer suggested both a reorganization of the letter draft to bring two similar points together into the same part of the paper, and further development of her topics by "providing more examples." Smith followed this advice and conducted a major revision, which improved her paper.

Low Rate of Student Revision in Response to Teacher and Peer Comments

Despite the success of peer response for some students, however, peer and teacher response did not result in high rates of revision by the class as a whole (Table 5.1). Sherman's and Breihan's students revised in response to more than 90 percent of the meaning-changing comments. Robison's students, however, revised in response to only 50 percent of their peers' meaning-changing comments, and to none of Robison's. Why?

Robison's Methods for Mandating Revision

We believe one reason is the teacher's methods for mandating revision. Breihan required revision from his students after Essay 1; revision was optional after Essay 2. Sherman required revision after his response

Table 5.1 Student Revisions After Peer and Teacher Suggestions

Suggestion	Peer Suggestions		Teacher Suggestions	
	Low Success ^a Papers	High Success Papers	Low Success Papers	High Success Papers
<i>Meaning-Changing^b Suggestions</i>				
Select relevant materials ^c	3 (2) ^d	3 (0)	5 (0)	0
Paper is vague	0	0	1 (0)	0
Improve organization	2 (1)	0	1 (0)	0
Add topic sentences	2 (2)	0	0	0
Answer the question asked	0	0	1 (0)	0
Correct inaccuracy	0	0	1 (0)	0
<i>Surface Suggestions</i>				
Type the paper	n.a.	n.a.	2 (2)	2 (2)
Revise paragraphing	1 (1)	1 (0)	0	0
Clarify sentence meaning	0	1 (0)	0	0
Add/correct citations	0	4 (3)	4 (2)	4 (3)
Correct mechanics	14 (13)	16 (16)	6	0

^a "Success" refers to grade given to paper both during the course and on the post-course primary trait analysis (p. 36).

^b See p. 40 for definition of "meaning changing."

^c Material refers to sufficient specific information relevant to the recipient.

^d Parentheses contain the number of suggestions that resulted in revisions by the writer.

N = The six lowest-success and six highest-success students who attended peer response sessions (a seventh lowest-success student in our sample did not attend).

to drafts, except for the few drafts that were already at an "A" level. Robison did not require revision. Also, both Breihan and Sherman mandated changes in the revised version separate from the teacher's specific comments. Breihan mandated that the introductory or thesis paragraph be changed in the revision. Sherman mandated that the final paper be reduced to a maximum of five pages. Robison did not mandate particular changes in phrasing or length.

Sequence of Peer and Teacher Responses

Second, we believe that the sequence of peer and teacher responses and their position within the total writing process played a role. In Sherman's and Breihan's classes, the teachers responded to mainly handwritten drafts and there had been no peer response. In Robison's

class, students first brought handwritten drafts for peer response, then revised their papers and submitted a typed draft for Robison's comments, after which they could revise once more for the final grade.

Several dynamics may be at work here. By the time the drafts reached Robison, students had already invested a great deal of time and effort. The act of typing may have locked in the copy, making students unwilling to retype them after Robison's suggestions. Timing may also have been a factor. Students received their drafts back with Robison's suggestions in the class period after having submitted them. But it was late April, lovely weather, and only two weeks from the end of the school year. Half the class were seniors. Further, with Robison's ongoing point system, students knew exactly where they were (except for the final exam) in terms of a final grade for the course, and the number of points they would have received for revising their papers was relatively low (see the assignment sheet earlier in this chapter). Finally, revision for some aspects such as "selection of relevant material," Robison's most frequent suggestion, would have required a fundamental reshaping of the paper and a return to textbook or notes in order to meet Robison's expectation that students would include specific course material over a range of topics angled to the needs of a fully delineated letter recipient. Some students did not have the detailed class notes needed to provide specific course material, as we have seen, but others did not have the time, energy, or motivation to undertake such a major task.

Differences between Peer and Teacher Response

Peer response took place in class and was guided by the Peer Review sheet (p. 152). Students revised after peer response and then, finally, presented a draft to Robison for her comments, after which they could revise again for the final grade. We noted several difficulties in this pattern.

First, peers' evaluations of "selection of relevant material" did not correspond to Robison's judgments (Table 5.1). On four low-success papers, peers did not comment on selection of relevant material, but Robison later did. On three high-success papers, peers suggested changes, the writer ignored the suggestions, and Robison thought the papers were fine.

Peers seemed to do best on aspects for which there were clear rules or conventions—mechanics, presence of topic sentences, handling of the outside reference, and organization of the paper (a fairly simple

affair in the letters, meaning basically that topics were treated one at a time and only one topic was treated in a section). We speculate that if the requirements for vaguer areas such as "selection of relevant material" were made more specific, using insights we gained through the primary trait analysis, peer responses might more nearly match Robison's. For example, for "selection of relevant material," peers might be asked to check whether the writer had covered at least 4 topics of the 14 that had been covered so far in class; whether each topic was developed by citing specific information from the course material; how each topic was justified by the situation or need of the letter recipient; whether the vocabulary of the course was used, yet translated for the letter recipient; and so on.

Sequencing the Writer's Attention

In addition to the difficulties caused by peers' and teachers' varying responses, there were also difficulties in sequencing the writer's attention to various aspects. The Peer Review sheet (Figure 5.2) begins with substantive issues (such as organization and selection of relevant material) and works down to mechanics. Our tape recordings of the peer responses show that students followed that order. However, Table 5.1 shows that mechanics was the most frequent subject of comment among peers and resulted in the highest rate of revision. Thus, despite Robison's attempt to establish a hierarchy of response that postponed mechanics, the actual effect of the peer response was to provoke students to revise their papers for mechanics before they had received their teacher's response on more substantive issues.

For these reasons, we question the common pattern of having peers respond first, before teacher response. The metaphor seems to be that peers serve as a kind of "frontline troops," addressing the most significant or visible problems, and then the teacher responds to the finer points. Data from Robison's class suggest that this may be a problematic model for the relationship between peer and teacher response. It may be that the teacher should comment first, addressing the substantive issues that peers are not well able to evaluate. The weight of the teacher's authority early in the process might provoke the substantial reworking or return to information gathering that some students need. Peer comments might then address issues that are guided by more specific conventions.

Importance of Early Guidance

Another implication from our analysis is the importance of *early* teacher guidance before drafts are produced. The six high-success students and the four middle-success students from our focus group were the ones who had appropriately planned the paper, relying on the early web exercise, on their counselor roles, and on their use of class notes and textbook as they composed. These successful students received very few substantive suggestions from peers, ignored some of those suggestions, and received no substantive suggestions from Robison (Table 5.1). On the other hand, students who had ignored the early web or missed class, who either adopted a textbook-processor role or did not invest energy in delineating a reader (or both), and who had minimal class notes or did not use their notes and textbooks in composing, did not generally correct all those problems through revision.

ROBISON'S AND WALVOORD'S CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have “read” Robison’s class in terms of the complex roles of both teacher and students, showing how the roles influenced the nature of good/better/best reasoning and the nature of students’ difficulties. The professional-in-training role was expected by teachers in all four classrooms, but the specific nature of that role was quite different in each. Similarly, the five tasks of good/better/best reasoning were necessary in each classroom, but the different roles expected of students meant that the reasoning was different in Robison’s class, where the writer did not make the final decision but rather facilitated the decision making of the client.

Though students’ roles created some differences, nonetheless, we also said in this chapter that the same six areas of difficulties existed and that those difficulties appeared to be influenced by some of the same students’ strategies and teacher’s methods we constructed in Sherman’s and Breihan’s classes—for example, the teacher’s language on the assignment sheet and students’ ways of using the assignment sheet; students’ use of models from other settings and the teacher’s guidance of that use; students’ idea-generating strategies and the teacher’s guidance (especially the web); students’ and the teacher’s different approaches to the textbooks; students’ pre-draft writing and teacher’s guidance.

Finally, in this chapter, we explored how Robison's method of peer and teacher draft response worked. We compared the relatively low rate of student revision in Robison's class to the higher rates of revision after teacher response in Sherman's and Breihan's classes. We concluded that contextual factors can significantly affect how, and whether, students respond to peer and teacher comments. We questioned the metaphor that represents peers as "frontline troops" offering the first, broad-level response.

In each of the three classrooms under study, our data analysis spurred changes in the teacher's methods. The next chapter reports what Walvoord and Anderson discovered, not only in Anderson's initial class, but in the same class three years later, after Anderson had implemented changes based on the initial study.