



Improving Student Writing Through Modeling

Introduction

Asking students to write in college classrooms can cause frustration on both ends. As instructors, often what we ask students for and what they give us do not add up. It's easy to view their less than stellar work as a reflection of apathy for the class or a lack of understanding. Students can feel apprehensive and overwhelmed at the thought of writing in a college setting, leading to procrastination and other avoidance behaviors that result in poor quality submissions. Instructors can help students overcome anxiety and support them in the writing process using modeling.

Modeling is a pedagogical method to help students understand the thinking needed to answer a question completely and concisely. Providing instruction on reading and writing at the post-secondary level may seem counter-intuitive, but it makes a difference. Though students may have developed general reading and writing skills by the time they get to your classroom, if you want students to be successful with you, they need a refresher in how to read and write in technical disciplines.

Students view each class as a separate entity. The skills they learned in one class, for example, English, are completely separate from other classes and are not generally transferred (Moje, 1996). They may not make connections between classes as easily as experienced faculty. Additionally, agriculture is a technical subject area, which requires a completely different literacy skillset than those used in English classes (Buehl, 2010). Students may not have had the chance to develop literacy skills needed for a technical discipline. By modeling how to read, process, and respond to a writing prompt, you can help set your students up for success.

How It Works

Modeling gives insight into the thinking surrounding a task. To help increase student motivation and buy-in, select a prompt from an upcoming writing task and use a well-developed rubric.

- 1) Show the prompt on the board and read it aloud to your students. Ask them to identify the key action verbs they need to address. Have students circle and underline on their own copy of the prompt. If you ask students to highlight the parts of the prompt they need to respond to, they will highlight the entire passage and lose sight of the specifics. By asking them to isolate the action verbs, students must read and process each individual sentence.
- 2) After discussing the key terms indicated by students, reread the prompt aloud and verbalize your thinking. An example statement might be, "This isn't technically a question, but addressing this in my answer would really help strengthen the response."
- 3) Show an example response to your students, one of fair-to-good quality works the best. If possible, and with permission, use previous student work for the examples. Ask students to read the response and discuss the type of feedback they would give the writer. Did they fail to answer all of the questions in the prompt? Is the writing unclear? How could this answer be improved? etc. Have students share and discuss with a partner. Encourage students to use their rubric for scoring and feedback. Giving feedback and discussing with a partner is an important strategy to build cognition and critical thinking. It allows them to start scaffolding the necessary components of a high-quality answer. Discuss responses as a class after the pairs are done.
- 4) Show an exemplar response. Again, ask the students to score it and give the author some feedback. This time, discuss what the strengths of the response are, why it is more effective than the previous response, and what elements can be translated into their response.

- 5) Give students a few minutes to begin outlining their response to the prompt. They will need time to generate a substantive answer. They might also need to be prompted that good technical writing is thorough and concise — wordiness does not make a better response. It is important to remind them good writing takes time and several drafts.

Why It Works

Modeling may seem simplistic and elementary to college faculty, but students respond positively. As faculty, we are experts at reading and writing in our discipline. We have complex processes we use regularly to help decode information. Students do not have a skillset as developed as ours. By taking the time to breakdown our processes and show them to the students, we can help build their knowledge and understanding. Showing students how we read and write in our technical fields is an important step to help them build connections to the knowledge and skills they already have.

A little extra effort up front and a few reminders throughout the semester can have a positive benefit on the students' work and self-esteem. Once they have been shown how to read and write in your discipline, they can feel empowered and confident in their skillset. The 15-20 minutes it takes to complete a modeling activity is an investment that pays off all semester.

References

Buehl, D. 2011. Developing readers in the academic disciplines. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Moje, E.B. 1996. "I teach students, not subjects": Teacher-student relationships as contexts for secondary literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly* 31(2): 172-195.

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