ABSTRACT
Engaging students in online discussion is often a concern for instructors. While students will respond to the discussion questions, the responses often consist of paraphrasing class readings and lectures. Frequently, students are not making the connection to present learning and application to future learning is not evidenced. Also, responses do not lead to genuine interaction between the students, peers and instructor. To create more engagement in the online discussion, reflective writing involving experiences with the previous week's assignments needs to be implemented in the discussion. Based on the research of Sommer’s writer’s memo, the online reflective writing is a modification of the writer’s memo, going beyond reflecting on a previous paper, but transcending into writing about experiences with assignments during the discussion. The week following the assignment the instructor posts a discussion question requiring responses to the student's experience with the previous task. Responses include the successes, struggles, and thought process. When responding, students see how their experiences compare to their peers and more discussion takes place. Furthermore, the discussion allows the instructor to explain any areas of misconception and allows for further learning past the assignment. Not only does the modified writer’s memo provide more engagement, but in agreement with Parisi’s argument, it allows for an audience outside the instructor. Along with engaging the student and instructor in the assignment, the reflection gives students a more authentic audience. In all, the modified writer’s memo creates both engagement and an avenue for future learning past the weekly assignment.

KEYWORDS: Engagement, Discussion writer’s memo, Online class, Reflective writing

INTRODUCTION
Among online college and university instructors, much discussion takes place about student learning and student engagement. Discussion often revolves around the idea of using formative assessment such as Angelo and Cross’s Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) (Angelo, Cross, 1993). In the traditional classroom, the CATs are typically anonymous; however, the online classes often integrates the CATs into the weekly discussion. While the Cats assess student learning before the final assignment assessment, a method is needed to provide feedback after the last submission. A writer’s memo is designed to aid the instructor after the completed assignment and provides a means to assess student learning after the last task. Furthermore, the memo intent is to encourage student learning. Normally, the memo would be a letter to the instructor sharing the experience with the assignment and attached to the final paper. In some online classrooms, this is not possible due to the limitations of the facilitator and built in tasks. Furthermore, some discussion questions the usefulness of the writer’s memo because students are limited by the instructor as an audience. To fully engage students in learning before and
after the final assessment, implementing a modified writer’s memo will accomplish the task by providing a diverse audience.

THE WRITER’S MEMO

Typically, a writer’s memo accompanies a writing assignment and is a short, ungraded writing that is placed after the completed paper. When submitting the memo, the student will respond to various questions about the written assignment. The response includes such areas as explaining the thought process, sharing difficulties in organizing the paper, or working through the writing process. The questions could be anything the instructor would like the student to share about the writing. The purpose of the memo is to allow students to reflect on their writing experience and to assist the instructor in the feedback given to the student. The memo “is intended to take both student and teacher behind the paper, into the composing process which produced the draft” (Sommers, 1988). A writer’s memo allows the instructor to dwell into another dimension of the writing process by seeing what goes on in the mind of the student while completing the assignment. When writing a writer’s memo, the student is invited to reflect on the learning process. In addition, the writer’s memo helps students create some distance from the writing and allows them to think about the process that took place during the writing. Furthermore, the reflection allows the instructor to give better guidance and respond to the thoughts (Giles, 2010).

Originally, Sommers, a long time user of the writer’s memo, shared he has not encountered any problems or shortcomings with the memos. However, later on Sommers began to question the way the writer’s memo is used (Sommers, 2011). In his first year writing class, students were required to write a reflective memo about the experience with writing. He noted students who repeated the class tended to plagiarize from their previous memo, and the reflections tended to be more of what the instructor expected to hear rather than what students thought or felt. Parisi would concur with Sommers. She noted memos in writing portfolios tended to be void of real reflections as they were written without any depth of thought. In a sense, the memos were not showing a true feeling of the student’s experience. Because of similar findings, educators began to doubt the benefits of reflecting writing (Parisi, 2014).

In Sommers’s evaluation of the reflective writing, he concluded that writing a memo after the final assignment was not enough. As a result, he started to assign weekly memo assignments. The activities started the first week of class and began with students sharing their ideas about writing classes. During the following week, a list of the ideas was compiled, and the class discussed each of the ideas. This activity led to better student engagement. Throughout the semester, Sommers added different opportunities to write about writings and assignments. The opportunities lead to more success and allowed students to see the connection of the assignments to future learning. In comparison, Parisi, added a third audience to the writing. Instead of writing to the instructor, she had her students write to different audiences such as explaining the process of writing a paper to a relative (Parisi, 2014). By giving students the third audience, the reflections were more honest and showed more depth of thinking than the thoughts written only to the instructor. A writer’s memo allows the instructor to dwell into another dimension of the writing process by seeing what goes on in the mind of the student while completing the assignment. When writing a writer’s memo the student is invited to reflect on the writing process. In addition, the writer’s memo helps students create some distance from the writing and allows them to think about the process that took place during the writing (or any activity). Furthermore, the reflection allows the instructor to give better guidance and response to the thinking process (Giles, 2010). Wardle completed a longitudinal study tracking the transference of knowledge from students taking the first year writing courses. While students did learn much about writing in the courses, the knowledge did not seem to transfer to other classes. Students also commented that even though they learned about writing in the classes, the skills were not utilized in other classes. In the study Wardle noted students who did reflective writing did more transference than those who did not reflect (Wardle, 2007). Adding to this, more transference of knowledge seemed to be from those who discussed feedback with peers and instructors. To transfer knowledge and apply the knowledge to future courses, students need to have a meta-awareness about the process in the prior learning. Using a writer’s memo helps to create the awareness.

Feedback

Feedback after a final assignment, such as an essay, is considered summative assessment. The summative assessment can serve many purposes such as meeting national standards or core values. After receiving the summative assessment, the students know how they met or did not meet the criteria of the assignment. However, if the assessment is to be used to show the student how to continue to improve in the learning, the assessment needs to be geared more towards the student and to be more formative. The formative assessment not only aids the teacher but allows the student to receive more productive feedback.

Importantly, formative assessment is inclusive, as it means sharing learning goals with pupils and providing feedback to help them to identify how to improve. Together, teacher and pupils review and evaluate work. In this way, the students come to understand both the language and processes of assessment so that they learn how to make judgments about their work (Burke, Hammett, 2009).

The writer’s memo provides an avenue for formative assessment at the time of summative assessment by allowing the student to reflect on writing, and this reflection aids the instructor in providing the student feedback. Belanger, Bliquez, and Mondal completed research on the value of multiple assessments. During the research, the writer’s memo was included with a final assignment. Part of the memo requirements were to respond to specific questions about the writing experience. While the memo provided valuable information in the collection of data “it also helped to introduce student voices in a meaningful way to our feedback and assessment process, in that instructors were able to read what students thought about their research experiences and what they had learned”. The memos served to show what the students had learned and were able to apply to their writing (Belanger, Bliquez, Mondal, 2012).
Providing feedback in multiple ways will help students improve and continue to improve in writing once the final assessment is made. Along with classroom assessment techniques, peer reviews, and rubric assessments, the writer's memo adds the needed form of assessment to aid in the future development of the writer.

**The Writer's Memo and the Traditional Classroom**

The first time I used a writer's memo was in a Composition I class. At the onset of the class, I made some changes in the curriculum and went to thematic type writing. Students started by sharing significant events in their personal life and progressing to a final argumentative essay by taking a stand on an issue important to them. To understand the value of the assignment, and to check how the students were progressing through the assignment, the writer's memo proved to be a valuable tool. The first written assignment involved creating a writer's collage about significant events in life. The outcome was to produce short snippets; moreover, I felt uneasy about the students' reaction to the assignment. The writing was different from what the students were used to doing, and I was unsure of the outcome or how students would respond. In the writer's memo, I asked students to share their experience and thought process. One student reply with the following statement.

"Writing all of these moments in my life has made me reflect on all of the good things. I have been very fortunate, and I'm thankful. Thinking about the experience I had when moving, and then the trouble I went through to learn English had made me think how far I've come. Although I graduated six months ago, thinking of the amazing times, I spent with friends, and all the memories have been a good thing to remember."

The memo not only allowed me to see the thought process of the student but through this, I quickly learned English was not the student's first language. The information was invaluable in helping me to understand the way the feedback needed to be presented to the student.

Another student shared, "I knew what events to write about, but I had a hard time knowing if the sentences were correct or if my grammar was right. I can come up with pretty good ideas, but I have a hard time with the grammar and sentences". In responding to the student in the feedback, I was able to praise the content and give suggestions for the mechanics as well as advise the student to go to the writing studio. If the student did not share the struggles with the sentences, the writing could have received feedback such as “proofread your work”. Using the writing studio helped the student to become more successful in the future papers in the class.

The memo, for the final assignment, gave more insight into the writer.

The last assignment was to take a stand, and one student shared the following reflection:

"I thought that persuading someone to view a situation my way would be easy to put on paper. I was incorrect. This essay was the most challenging of the class. I know that college is about challenges; however, this essay made me rethink my return to college. I came very close to giving up because I could not organize my thoughts..."

with my quotes. Not being able to tie my quotes together with my thoughts made the planning stage of the essay difficult. When giving feedback to the writer, the memo invited me to address the challenge and comment on the success of not “giving up”, but completing the task. I also was able to note the way the quotes were used and comment on more effect use of the quoting. This response allowed for the feedback to be more meaningful and allows for future success in writing. During the Composition I class, the writer’s memo allowed me to provide better feedback to the students, but also allowed a deeper interaction and created a means of making students active participants in their writing.

In many online classes, instructors do not have control over the curriculum, so adding extra assignment requirements is not an option. Nevertheless, with some modifications, the online instructor can find the memo to be a valuable tool to aid in feedback to the students. The use of the memo can be accomplished in one of two ways: the comment box when submitted or an added component to the discussion area. Many online classes have a comment area to use when students submit work. Often a student will make a comment such as, “I enjoyed this assignment” or “I struggled with this”. Since students already communicate feelings about the paper, asking for a short reflection upon submission allows for this naturally to take place.

Stephen Berhardt, Chair in Writing at the University of Delaware, uses the writer's memo as a cover memo in his online classes. Before students submit a written assignment, the memo is written in the comment box, and students attach a copy of the writing to be evaluated. He asks students to respond to such questions as “What was done well?” or any question that he would find valuable in accessing the students’ work. The way the students respond to the memo, aid in giving more constructive feedback to the student. Berhardt comments about his experience with the reflection, “It was like revealing our shortcomings. Such challenges are, I am convinced, a strong link in learning. Taking a reflective pause after completing a project is the best way to begin to internalize one’s learning”.

In a Composition II online class, a comment box was not present in the assignment submission section, so I used the writer’s memo as a “One Minute Paper” posted in the discussion area. The class assignment was to write a rough draft of a definition paper.

The directions were posted a couple of days before the due date with the following prompt:

"Now, that you have completed your first rough draft, create a one minute memo detailing your experience with this assignment. Include your thoughts on the assignment, what was hard, what was easy, the process used, or how you organized your thoughts. Consider what you have learned about definition writing. In other words, you are writing about your writing experience."

Since this was my first online experience with the writer’s memo, I was not sure what to expect.
One student responded “I am not in any sense of the word a writer, so the entire process was hard for me. I had a hard time formulating words and trying not to plagiarize and present something grade worthy”. After reading the reflection, I immediately graded the paper and made comments within the document, relating to wording and some organization. Because the student seems to lack confidence in writing, I made sure I commented on what was done right and praised the student for having a good originality report. Posting the writer’s memo in the discussion areas allows for another layer of feedback. Not only did the student have comments on the rough draft about the problems in writing, but I was also able to share in a more personal way in an open forum that provoked further conversation. While not every student had posted before the feedback was given, some posted later, responding after the feedback was given. Even though this was not the intent of the post, this gave students the opportunity to answer to the feedback and produced more student engagement.

After receiving feedback from the rough draft, a student shared, “Initially, I felt relieved about writing this type of paper because I had written one in another class. This was until I learned that using work from another class was self-plagiarism”. Responding about the self-plagiarism allowed others to have a deeper understanding of plagiarism and could prevent problems in future classes.

When sharing ways to help students online, it is a little difficult to determine if the students take the advice. I was pleased to see this response from a student:

Generally when I start an essay I will list ideas. This time, I took your advice and began by free writing. I was comfortable doing it that way. Once my thoughts were down on paper, I started to organize them until the puzzle was pretty complete.

Sharing this in an open forum helped others to respond and note how a tool such as free writing could help with writing a paper and prevent writer’s block. This information would not have been known if the memo was not completed.

The downside of using the writer’s memo is that it cannot always be required, and students have to volunteer the information. Still, when used in the discussion area, participation points can be awarded, and this can be an incentive for student response. Nevertheless, student responses did seem a little higher in this area than the replies from the usual classroom assessment techniques.

Taking the idea of the writer’s memo to another level can be an effective way to interact with students about feedback and feelings about any class assignment. The memo does not have to be limited to the English class. In my classes, I have changed the writer’s memo to a means of discussion from a prior week’s assignment. The memo is used to not only give the students a chance to reflect on feedback and feelings about a prior assignment, but also serves as a connection to future assignments.

Students in the ENG 147 class are beginning college students. Many of them have been out of college for a few years and struggled with writing skills. In the class, each assignment leads up to the final essay. The writer’s memo is used in the discussion area during the second week of class. During this time, the students reflect on the prior week’s assignment. A prompt may look something like the following guideline:

For the first assignment, you chose topics for the final research paper. Now, that you have finished the assignment, explain what was challenging and what was easy in choosing the topic. How did you decide on your topic, and in what ways will this topic have to be narrowed for the next assignment.

Students respond to the prompt in a variety of ways. Some choose to respond to the feedback, others choose to respond to the experience of choosing a topic, and others will respond by sharing how the topic may be hard to limit for the upcoming assignment.

The following is an example of a typical response:

I chose a topic that was not on the list, and the topic I chose was one that I do not know anything about. In my feedback, the instructor explained the list was designed with topics that would help students succeed in the class, and since I have not written a paper in many years, it would be a good idea for me to write a topic I am familiar with. In this way, I can concentrate more on the writing.

The response led to further discussion about the feedback and choosing a topic. If the student had only read the feedback and not had a chance to respond to it; then the conversation would have ended. Not only did the comment allow for instructor input, other students also contributed to the conversation and shared similar experiences. This post gave the student an audience outside of the instructor. Further discussion from students led to the idea of narrowing the topics for the next assignment, and this helped connect the prior learning with the new learning. In the HUM 115 class students work on critical thinking skills. In this class, the writer’s memo takes on a different personality, and instead of using the title “Writer’s Memo” the phrase “Digging for Gold” has been used.

In the Week 1 Assignment, you had to list the stages of critical thinking and identify your current level of critical thinking. Now, let’s pan a little for gold by reflecting on the assignment. How did this assignment help you determine your present level of thinking? In what ways are you satisfied with your current level of thinking, and what changes do you need to make in your thinking to progress to the next step?

An example of the response was:

I found last week’s assignment very helpful in helping me identify what level of critical thinking I am currently at. I think since I am at the “challenged thinker” level and know that I have problems in my thinking, I am ok with this for the moment because I discovered my level of thinking. I have been very active in trying to get to the next level, the “beginning thinker”. I have started analyzing and evaluating what I am thinking to determine if my thoughts are based on facts and on logic, or if my thoughts are based on emotions. I look forward to moving to the next step of critical thinking to see how I can remove barriers from critical thinking.
Regardless of if the class is English, critical thinking, or some other class, the writer’s memo can be modified to meet the needs of the class. By modifying the writer’s memo to build on ideas from one week to the next and by discussing the responses, coincides with Yancey’s ideas of creating a variety of experiences for reflection distributed throughout the course. In Parisi’s research, the idea of the audience became apparent for successful reflection. When creating the modification, the audience can be not only the students and instructor but students can address the reflections to different people, for example, an explanation of thinking process can be written to a cousin or friend. The ideas are limitless, and the instructor can take the memos in any direction that would fit the needs of the students (Parisi, 2014).

**ENGAGING STUDENTS**

The idea of student engagement has evoked much conversation and literature about the importance of students being actively involved in the learning. The more involved a student is in the learning, the more learning will take place. The learning involves activities other than studying for an exam or writing a paper. The student needs to be an active participant in the learning process, and this is especially true when the student interacts with the instructor (Axelson, Flick, 2011). By utilizing a modified writer’s memo in the classroom, the instructor is inviting the student to be actively engaged in the assessment, and, as a result, more learning will take place. The students will develop more in their academic skills and apply the skills to new learning once the class ends.


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