

The Best of Both Worlds: The Large Lecture, Writing-Intensive Course

Josh Boyd

Courses: Any Large Lecture, Communication Course

Objective: Students will write cogent and cohesive arguments about communication

Introduction

Ideally, college classes are small. Hostettler (1958) argued, “Our profession has long demanded small classes as essential for adequate instruction,” adding that communication professors in the 1950s found larger class sizes “a most unpopular solution” to the challenges of rising enrollment (p. 101). More recently, Kilgore and Cook (2007) observed that large class sizes can be an obstacle to good teaching. However, there is financial and human resource value in delivering quality course content in large lectures. Consequently, large lecture classes are a fundamental part of the undergraduate student experience at many colleges and universities. In this essay, I argue that the benefits of small class sizes need not be discarded in the face of large lecture formats. The large lecture, writing-intensive class helps students learn by combining the efficiencies of a large lecture with the feedback, revision, and engagement processes of a writing-intensive class.

Inspired by our College of Liberal Arts’ initiative to develop writing-intensive courses and motivated by a need to prepare students better for a communication major, I developed a course called Critical Perspectives on Communication. More than 2450 students have been in my 13 large lecture versions of the course (150–225 students per section). The class is one of three courses required of prospective communication majors. To enter the major, students must earn a 2.67 grade point average across the three courses. This particular course is something of a hybrid foundational course in criticism. This essay does not focus on the course content, but rather on how one can teach a writing-intensive course in a large lecture format.

Josh Boyd, Purdue University, Communication, 100 N. University, BRNG 2114, West Lafayette, IN, 47907-2098, USA. Email: boyd@purdue.edu

Description and Rationale

The writing across the curriculum movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s out of a belief that all students needed more instruction and practice in writing (Russell, 1994). Bean (1996) suggested that critical thinking and writing are linked, and in a survey of liberal arts faculty, Weiser (1999) found that more than 97% of faculty teaching upper-division classes required some sort of writing. The University of Hawaii, for example, requires students to take at least five writing-intensive courses and has offered 489 different writing-intensive courses in a variety of disciplines across the university (Chinn & Hilgers, 2000).

While writing as a form of communication clearly has disciplinary relevance, writing is also an important learning tool. A fundamental premise of the Writing to Learn movement is the notion that students become better thinkers through the writing process itself (Bazerman et al., 2005). In other words, actually writing down ideas aids in the construction and revision of them. In their study of writing in secondary school classrooms, Langer and Applebee (1987) found that “activities involving writing . . . lead to better learning than activities involving reading and studying only” (p. 135).

Most of the time, however, this recognition of writing’s connection to learning and intensive focus on writing as an instructional tool is limited to small classes. Most of the published studies focus on classes of less than 20 students, for example 15–25 students at Indiana University (Farris & Smith, 1992), 20 students at the University of Wisconsin and University of Hawaii (Westphal-Johnson & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Chinn & Hilgers, 2000), and 12 at Davidson College (Simpson & Carroll, 1999). Although writers occasionally allude to the possibility of a large lecture writing-intensive class, none have really examined them specifically as such (e.g., Farris & Smith, 1992; Westphal-Johnson & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

The notion of a large lecture, writing-intensive class, then, is a paradox that requires some explanation. Definitions of *large lecture* classes vary, but enrollments above 100 fit most definitions (Gorham, 1988; Kramer & Pier, 1999; Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996). There is also some variation in defining a “writing-intensive” class, but Farris and Smith (1992) have suggested some typical characteristics: students write at least 5000 words per semester (at least 2000 of which are graded); at least 50% of students’ grades are determined through writing assignments; students receive feedback with opportunities for revision; and class size is limited to a maximum of 25 (see also the University of Hawaii’s similar requirements in Hilgers, Hussey, & Stitt-Bergh, 1999).

In the large lecture version that is the subject of this essay, these basic standards are all met or exceeded. Students typically write 5000–6000 words, *all of which* are part of graded assignments. More than 70% of a student’s final grade is determined by writing. Some drafts for feedback are required, and students have access to all teaching assistants (TAs) as well as the large lecture professor for help. Class size maximums are achieved through weekly TA-taught recitation sections limited to 25 students each (although 150–225 are in the large lecture that meets twice weekly).

Other details of the course are not directly related to the writing-intensive mission, but contribute to carrying out that mission. The course is directed by a single faculty member, working with several TAs, each of whom is responsible for two or three recitation sections (the equivalent of quarter-time and half-time appointments, respectively). The course uses Blackboard to post the syllabus, assignments, course announcements, and grades. When writing assignments are done in class, they happen in the recitation sections (not the large lecture). Most writing assignments give students an opportunity to receive TA feedback during the recitation period and then have revision time before the paper is actually turned in, either via email or at the end of the next large lecture meeting.

Daily assignments in this class do not follow a uniform pattern, but are adapted to the specific learning goals of each of the course's four units. There are typically several short 1–2 page essays (see Appendix A for two examples of assignments used in the past), and the class also includes one reading quiz, two writing workshops (where students receive feedback and grades for thesis statements and topics for the major papers), and some short assignments where students find and critique examples of course concepts (e.g., a chiasmus and a cartoon that operates enthymematically).

Course Management

The fact that students all attend the same lectures but have different recitation instructors and graders introduces a need for a system of checks and balances in assessment. Fleming (2001) called evaluating subjective work the biggest challenge in grading, and it is no surprise that students are concerned about the fairness of grading writing across multiple sections and TAs. If 70% of the final course grade depends on writing, students want assurances that the grading will be fair and consistent across the course, and even across semesters.

Holistic grading with a 5-point scale¹. To achieve the objective of fairness, I rely on holistic grading with a 5-point grading scale (with 5 as the highest grade), a rubric (see Appendix B), multiple graders, TA training and norming, and an appeals process. The 5-point scale is useful because numbers don't carry the baggage, either for graders or for students, that letter grades carry. Holistic grading assesses the overall quality of a project rather than scoring component parts and adding them together (i.e., analytic scoring). Using a 5-point scale, combined with a rubric describing what is expected of each number, graders evaluate papers based on general criteria that can be applied to any writing assignment: clarity of thesis, quality of support, general fluency of writing, and other key areas. With only 5 possible points (rather than, say, 100), graders are much more consistent in evaluating papers. The difference between a 94 and a 96 is much more subject to disagreement than the difference between a 2 and a 4 on the 5-point scale.

Rubric. The use of rubrics is certainly not new, although it is also not standard practice. Stern and Solomon (2006) studied 598 different papers from 30 different academic departments and found that only 8% used any type of rubric, with only 4 papers (0.67%) using detailed rubrics like the one in this course. A rubric in general is

simply a “performance framework/continuum for assessing students’ work,” and as such is the kind of scoring sheet often used as a basis for grading speeches in the basic public speaking course (Gschwend, 2000, p. 1). A rubric contributes to learning because it “empowers students by informing them how their work will be evaluated” (Fleming, 2001, p. 7). The use of a rubric to normalize writing across a large lecture communication course, however, is not common. As a result, I had to develop my own rubric. I began with the rubric used by the California state system to assess incoming freshmen’s writing proficiency (California State University, 2004). Keeping several of the generic labels identifying each level of skill (clearly competent, satisfactory, unsatisfactory, serious weaknesses/severe difficulties) and adding one of my own (clearly excellent), I altered the scale from six to five points and changed the wording of each description to better reflect my course objectives related to critical thinking and writing about communication. The adapted rubric provided in Appendix B is intended merely as a starting point for adaptation to specific courses.

Norming with teaching assistants. With the foundation of the rubric and its 5-point scale, several other factors also contribute to consistency. First, each semester I try to retain at least one TA experienced with the class. I train new TAs to apply the rubric consistently, with the help of old TAs, both at the beginning of the semester for the first 6–8 small assignments and on each major assignment. For each of the two or three major papers (1000+ words each), I meet with all TAs for a norming session in which we all read copies of the same papers, score them, and then discuss our scoring and work out any discrepancies. This is a variation of what Holt (1993) has called “controlled scoring sessions” (p. 72).

Minimal marking. Another contributor to consistency is the concept of “minimal marking” (Haswell, 1983, p. 601). This is a method of dealing with grammar and spelling errors that simply circles errors, or places checks in the margins, rather than correcting or commenting about them. Some students, as always, will not even look at anything but the grade. But for students concerned about improvement, minimal marking forces them to figure out or ask about their errors rather than having the correction done for them, an exercise that Haswell found led to an almost 50% reduction in errors over the course of a semester. For the purpose of maintaining consistency, minimal marking lets the grader spend more time on the overall quality of argument rather than on mechanical errors. At the same time, a lot of checks and circles provide support for a lower grade if that’s what a student receives. It also speeds up the process of grading such a huge volume of assignments. Haswell was correct in asserting that this method “shortens, gladdens, and improves the act of marking papers” (p. 601). This is not the only feedback students receive, however; TAs provide 2–3 comments related to the areas of the rubric that have the most relevance to the paper’s final grade. In norming sessions, we discuss the kinds of constructive comments that would be most appropriate.

Student appeals process. How fair and consistent does the holistic system turn out to be? Holt (1993) argued that holistic grading is both valid and reliable because it “expresses considered judgments informed by common standards” (p. 71). In order to convince students that this is true, my course encourages students to appeal grades

on major papers when they do not believe their grades correspond to the appropriate descriptions on the rubric. If, for instance, a student earns a 2 because a paper fails to include evidence that supports the argument, the student can appeal directly to me for reconsideration on the basis that there is, in fact, supporting evidence. The student must consult a TA first (other than the one who graded the paper), submit the appeal in writing (another opportunity to practice thinking and writing critically!), and be aware that I will assign a brand new grade based on my assessment according to the rubric.

One way to judge how much students learn to follow the rubric's standards, and how fair they perceive grading to be, is to study how often students appeal. Students have written approximately 6150 papers for the course through fall 2009. Of those, 201 (3.3%) have been appealed. Of the 201, only 76 (1.2%) resulted in grade changes (61 (1%) higher and 15 (0.2%) lower²). Students can be reassured of fairness because even in the unlikely event of an unfairly severe grade, there is an appeals process through which wrongs can be righted. Every semester, I post the updated statistics in the syllabus so that students know exactly what has happened in appeals. It also reinforces the notion that grading is, by and large, faithful to the standards on the rubric. The appeals process also alerts me to any discrepancies in grading among TAs. One semester, for instance, the first major paper resulted in a large number of appeals that resulted in nine grade changes—all on papers graded by the same TA.³ The appeals not only allowed me to change grades that needed to be changed, they also gave me an opportunity to work with that TA so that her grading was more consistent with the rubric for the rest of the semester.

Although the rubric should prevent some TAs from grading more strictly and others from grading more easily, I recognize that even minor but consistent variation can create unreliable results over the course of the assignments (which have ranged from a low of 20 to a high of 27 per semester). Sweedler-Brown (1985) found, in support of this potential problem, that more experienced graders tended to assign lower holistic scores, perhaps because "experience and training in using the holistic criteria scale may give graders the confidence to grade more critically" (p. 54). Consequently, the responsibility for assessing a single student's work is shared so that the grading load is distributed and any systemic discrepancies are evened out. A student's assigned TA grades daily assignments (3/7 of the final grade), the other TAs grade the student's two major papers (2/7 of final grade), and there are two scanned multiple choice exams (2/7 of the final grade). In this way, TA bias or tendency toward higher or lower grading should be minimized.

Appraisal

The large lecture, writing-intensive format attempts to improve student learning by improving student engagement in disciplinary content, aiming for the outcome Hilgers, Hussey, and Stitt-Bergh (1999) found in the University of Hawaii's writing-intensive classes: that students feel confident that they can write appropriately in their fields. Instead of simply taking exams, students are challenged to construct cogent

and cohesive arguments. The opportunity for extensive writing means that assignments directly apply concepts covered in class, either in targeted daily writing assignments or in 1000-word major papers.⁴

One of the most satisfying signs that students are learning is when professors of upper-division classes comment on how prepared students are for their specialized writing requirements. Comments on student evaluations also provide insight. Although students sometimes complain about the difficulty of the course and strict grading standards, many comments show that the objectives of this format (quality course content and depth of engagement through writing) are being met.⁵

The large lecture, writing-intensive class is no myth. With careful planning and TA help, it is possible to teach a writing-intensive course to large numbers of students effectively. Do students need a small class with a lot of writing and feedback? Or do situations require a large class in which to deliver subject matter content quickly and efficiently? Following this approach to teaching large numbers of students while still encouraging the development of critical thinking and writing skills through the iterative process of revision, there is no need to choose between the two.

Notes

- [1] When the 5-point scale is converted back to the A/B/C scale, 5 = A, 4 = B, 3 = C, 2 = D, and 1 = F. Any assignment not turned in receives a 0, meaning that students receive more credit for turning in unacceptable work than for turning in no work at all.
- [2] In most of the cases where grades were lowered, students either ignored the advice of their TAs OR had violated the university's academic integrity policy—in the latter cases, a closer reading of the paper brought dishonesty or plagiarism problems to light.
- [3] The TA's performance improved for the next two major papers, but her reputation had already been established. Although she was only a TA for one semester, she accounted for 24 of the 201 appeals in the entire history of the class.
- [4] Most daily assignments are shorter than 500 words, and most students' major papers end up being more than 1000 words. The word counts are used primarily as estimates to make sure we are fulfilling the writing-intensive purpose of the class rather than as grading standards for student writing.
- [5] Here are two recent samples: "This is the best course I love to hate. It is challenging and a great preparation for future writing/COM classes." "[The professor] provides a challenge, but makes it seem worthwhile to challenge ourselves, too."
- [6] I believe that presentations should be part of communication classes, even large lecture classes. This assignment gives students a chance to make presentations in their small recitation sections.

References and Suggested Readings

- Bazerman, C., Little, J., Bethel, L., Chavkin, T., Fouquette, D., & Garufis, J. (2005). *Reference guide to writing across the curriculum*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.
- Bean, J. C. (1996). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- California State University. (2004). Student learning outcomes in the CSU—Subject A scoring guide (rubric). Retrieved from <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/actbank/subja.htm>

- Chinn, P. W. V., & Hilgers, T. L. (2000). From corrector to collaborator: The range of instructor roles in writing-based natural and applied science courses. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 37, 3–25.
- Farris, C., & Smith, R. (1992). Writing-intensive courses: Tools for curricular change. In S. H. McLeod & M. Soven (Eds.), *Writing across the curriculum: A guide to developing programs* (pp. 71–86). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fleming, V. M. (2001). Helping students learn to learn by using a checklist, modified rubrics, and e-mail. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 12, 5–22.
- Gorham, J. (1988). The relationship between verbal teacher immediacy behaviors and student learning. *Communication Education*, 37, 40–53.
- Gschwend, L. (2000). Every student deserves an assessment tool that teaches. *Communication Teacher*, 14(3), 1–5.
- Haswell, R. H. (1983). Minimal marking. *College English*, 45, 600–604.
- Hilgers, T. L., Hussey, E. L., & Stitt-Bergh, M. (1999). “As you’re writing, you have these epiphanies”: What college students say about writing and learning in their majors. *Written Communication*, 16, 317–353.
- Holt, D. (1993). Holistic scoring in many disciplines. *College Teaching*, 41, 71–74.
- Hostettler, G. F. (1958). Rising college enrollments and teaching methods: A survey. *Speech Teacher*, 7, 99–103.
- Kilgore, D., & Cook, M. D. (2007). “In things and in minds”: Scholarly teachers’ struggles for legitimacy in a research-oriented institution. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 18, 143–161.
- Kramer, M. W., & Pier, P. M. (1999). Students’ perceptions of effective and ineffective communication by college teachers. *Southern Communication Journal*, 65, 16–33.
- Langer, J. A., & Abblebee, A. N. (1987). *How writing shapes thinking: A study of teaching and learning*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Lewis, L. K., & Hayward, P. A. (2003). Choice-based learning: Student reactions in an undergraduate organizational communication course [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning]. *Communication Education*, 52, 148–156.
- Moore, A., Masterson, J. T., Christophel, D. M., & Shea, K. A. (1996). College teacher immediacy and student ratings of instruction. *Communication Education*, 45, 29–39.
- Motavalli, P. P., Patton, M. D., Logan, R. A., & Frey, C. J. (2003). Promoting environmental writing in undergraduate soil science programs. *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*, 32, 93–99.
- Olwell, R., & Delph, R. (2004). Implementing assessment and improving undergraduate writing: One department’s experience. *The History Teacher*, 38, 21–34.
- Russell, D. R. (1994). American origins of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement. In C. Bazerman & D. R. Russell (Eds.), *Landmark essays on writing across the curriculum* (pp. 3–22). Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press. (Original work published 1992.)
- Simpson, M. S., & Carroll, S. E. (1999). Assignments from a writing-intensive economics course. *Journal of Economic Education*, 30, 402–410.
- Stern, L. A., & Solomon, A. (2006). Effective faculty feedback: The road less traveled. *Assessing Writing*, 11, 22–41.
- Sweedler-Brown, C. O. (1985). The influence of training and experience on holistic essay evaluations. *The English Journal*, 74(5), 49–55.
- Weiser, I. (1999). Local research and curriculum development: Using surveys to learn about writing assignments in the disciplines. In S. K. Rose & I. Weiser (Eds.), *The writing program administrator as researcher* (pp. 95–106). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Westphal-Johnson, N., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002). The role of communication and writing intensive courses in general education: A five year case study of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. *Journal of General Education*, 51, 73–102.

Appendix A

Sample Assignment: Recognizing Postmodern Approaches to Texts

DIRECTIONS: Watch a short film from <http://bmwfilms.com>, available now on YouTube (“Chosen”) twice and then write a 1–2 page (typed, double-spaced) critique of the postmodern characteristics of the film. Your thesis should be a simple argument such as: this film reveals its postmodern perspective by its use of X, Y, and Z. Use specific instances from the film to support your argument. Use your time in recitation to compose your argument and begin writing your paper. Take advantage of this time to share ideas with your TA and receive feedback.

Sample Assignment: Ethnography Proposal

DIRECTIONS: Propose an ethnographic study of a culture you already know well.

- (1) Identify the specific culture you want to study (fans of your favorite team, your extended family, your small hometown, your home state, an organization you belong to, your high school band, etc.).
- (2) Explain briefly how you would gather information about your culture. (Observation? Interviews? Something else?)
- (3) Explain reactivity problems you might face.
- (4) Suggest the kinds of things you would expect to include when “writing your culture.”

You will be graded on what you write, but you’ll also give a 1-minute presentation of your ethnographic study to your recitation section. If this is excellent, you will earn 1 bonus point.⁵

Appendix B

Grading Rubric

5

To earn a “5,” the paper features insightful development of ideas and is **clearly excellent**. Writing demonstrates a very strong understanding of concepts and texts. It features a clear thesis statement, persuasive reasoning, and good support and examples. In addition, it shows insight that goes beyond the basic requirements of the assignment. Transitions help the writing flow smoothly from one idea to the next, and there are almost no errors in grammar or spelling.

4

A “4” paper is **clearly competent**. Writing demonstrates clear understanding of concepts and texts, but does not display novel or particularly insightful approaches. It features a clear thesis statement and appropriate support and examples. Transitions create a generally smooth flow of ideas, and there are minimal errors in grammar or spelling. This paper is good but not exceptional.

3

A “3” paper is **satisfactory**: it meets the requirements of the assignment. Writing demonstrates understanding of concepts and texts, and there is a recognizable argument about communication. The thesis statement makes a claim, but support, though present, may be sketchy or underdeveloped. Transitions are somewhat awkward, and errors in grammar or spelling are present.

2

A “2” paper is **unsatisfactory**: it fails to meet the basic requirements of the assignment. Failing to follow the assignment automatically results in a grade no higher than 2. Other significant shortcomings that might lead to this grade include one or more of the following: writing demonstrates problems in understanding concepts and texts. The thesis statement does not make a clear claim, rendering support not well-connected to the central claim. There is not a complete argument. Examples may be irrelevant, and errors in logic may be present. The writing is disjointed and may have many distracting grammar and spelling errors.

1

A “1” paper exhibits **serious weaknesses or even severe difficulties**. It fails to meet the basic requirements of the assignment in multiple ways, including: writing demonstrates a failure to understand key concepts and texts. The thesis is unclear or missing, and examples may appear arbitrary, not clearly supporting claims. Errors in logic are present, and there is not sufficient development of ideas. This paper is difficult to read, full of grammar, spelling, and transition problems.

Copyright of Communication Teacher is the property of National Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.