Increasing Equity in General Education Using Self-Relevant Writing

By Karen Singer-Freeman and Linda Bastone

Abstract: We report evidence that a self-relevant writing curriculum can support student wellness, engagement, and cultural inclusiveness. We revised a general education class (Child Development) to include culturally responsive assessments and instructional practices and created self-relevant writing assignments with high utility value. In exit surveys, over 75% of students reported feeling that assignments enhanced learning, provided an accurate assessment of learning, encouraged reflection, and should be used in future classes. Responses to self-relevant writing assignments demonstrated awareness of the assignments' personal relevance and were rich with references to students' lived experiences. We found no evidence of equity gaps in self-relevant writing. Early retention data comparing participation in Child Development with participation in another large general education class (Introduction to Psychology) revealed that participation in Child Development may increase retention. Although preliminary, these findings may indicate that participation in a single deeply engaging class can have a broad impact on students' experience in college. The modified curriculum described here can serve as a model for other general education classes. Importantly, a self-relevant writing curriculum can be successfully adopted in both small and relatively large classes.

Too often general education classes default to didactic lectures paired with multiple-choice assessments. These pedagogical approaches lack cultural relevance and may disproportionately harm students from historically underrepresented groups by revealing false achievement gaps (differences in performance rather than competence). We propose that self-relevant writing is uniquely situated to act as a conduit for the acquisition and assessment of general education learning outcomes by encouraging integration across cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains, as well as increasing students' investment in the production of written content (Singer-Freeman & Bastone, 2018; Singer-Freeman & Bastone, in press). We report evidence that a self-relevant writing curriculum can support student wellness, engagement, and cultural inclusiveness. We believe the modified curriculum described here can serve as a model for other general education classes. Importantly, a self-relevant writing curriculum can be successfully adopted in both small and relatively large classes.

The curricular modifications were implemented in Child Development, a lower-level psychology course that satisfies a social sciences general education requirement. Child Development seats between 60 and 100 students when taught in person and 35 students when taught online. Approximately one-third of enrolled students are from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, one-third are first-generation college students, one-third are commuters, and one-fifth are transfer students. Over 70% of students fall into one of these groups and one-third of the class falls into two to four groups. The results reported here are drawn from four semesters of the course offered between 2015 and 2018. The course learning outcomes are informed by AAC&U Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) learning outcomes: written communication; inquiry and analysis; quantitative literacy; critical thinking; intercultural knowledge and competence; integrative learning; and applied learning. We revised Child Development with the goals of increasing equity, writing, and retention of concepts, and supporting student wellness. To meet these goals, we used culturally responsive assessments and instructional practices and incorporated self-relevant assignments with high utility value.
Providing students with opportunities to relate course content to their lives can be an effective way to ensure that assignment content is inclusive and engaging (Singer-Freeman & Bastone, 2018; Singer-Freeman & Bastone, in press). We encourage students to engage with class material in two types of assignments: chapter reflections and self-relevant writing. In chapter reflections, students select information from the textbook and explain why it is personally relevant. In weekly self-relevant writing assignments, students summarize content, apply the content autobiographically, consider ways the content informs their future plans, and prioritize information they wish to remember. Some assignments encourage students to include childhood images or letters to the future self, and in some semesters assignments were completed as part of ePortfolio practice. Four assignments include brief psychological interventions (sense of belonging, mindset, values affirmation, and grit) in which students are provided with different ways to view pivotal experiences that support resilient responses to future challenges (Walton, 2014). In addition to feedback via rubrics, the instructor provides students with supportive comments about each assignment. To build a sense of community, the instructor shares common themes during class. Often students view writing as a task to be completed rather than as a means of communicating with others; however, authentic writing requires an authentic audience. Bass (2017) describes “social pedagogy” as activities in which students engage in intellectual tasks that center around sharing knowledge with an audience of individuals who are valued. To increase the social pedagogy and students’ sense of having an authentic audience, the instructor encourages students to share assignments with family members, and in semesters when assignments were not included in ePortfolios, curates work into an attractive document returned to the student at the end of the semester. Initially, we removed all testing from the class. However, students reported that low-stakes quizzes would help them maintain focus during lectures. Weekly open-book quizzes were included for this purpose. Multiple-choice quiz questions were designed to have simple sentence structure and to use vocabulary that would be equally familiar to all students. The same questions were used in the online and in-person versions of the class.

We support equity using culturally responsive pedagogy (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). We set high standards while providing clear instructions and feedback that conveys confidence in students’ ability to meet the standards. For example, we use five similar learning outcomes in every rubric. Rubrics provide students with an understanding of what they must do to succeed and increase grading equity by helping evaluators apply standards uniformly. The consistency of rubrics used across assignments also scaffolds improved performance over time. In addition, autobiographical writing provides students with opportunities to increase the instructor’s understanding of their life experiences. As the instructor reads about students’ lives, they increase their cultural awareness. As the instructor shares what they have learned from student writing with the class, students from the groups being represented are further empowered. When students experience acceptance and respect for their perspectives and cultures, they are well-positioned to produce their best work. The impact of autobiographical assignments is increased when the instructor shares examples from student writing with the class.

To determine whether the course fulfilled our desired objectives, we collected information about students’ experiences. In exit surveys, over 75% of students reported feeling that assignments enhanced learning, provided an accurate assessment of learning, encouraged reflection, and should be used in future classes. Many students reported that self-relevant writing assignments encouraged conceptual integration. Although there were no length requirements, students produced a substantial body of writing. In the in-person class students produced an average of 592 words each week, and in the online class students produced an average of 712 words each week. Responses to self-relevant writing assignments and chapter reflections show an awareness of the assignments’ personal relevance and were rich with references to students’ lived experiences.

We were also interested in exploring students’ responses to different forms of assessment. We found no evidence of an achievement gap in self-relevant writing: Black and Hispanic students received similar grades to White and Asian students. An equitable pattern of grading was observed both when grading was completed by the instructor and when undergraduate teaching assistants assisted the instructor. To determine whether multiple-choice tests
might reveal evidence of an achievement gap, we examined students’ performance on the low-stakes open-book quizzes. We found that Hispanic and Black students in the in-person class received significantly lower quiz grades (77%) than White and Asian students (86%). Interestingly, there was not a significant difference between the quiz grades in the online class (Black and Hispanic average = 84%, White and Asian average = 88%). We hypothesize that the online setting may create a more positive environment for Hispanic and Black students because their own and others’ race and ethnicity are less salient in this setting than in an in-person class.

Finally, we were interested in whether completion of the brief psychological interventions influenced students. When asked on an exit survey to list the five most important things they learned, many students mentioned learning about grit and developing a growth mindset. Other similar brief psychological interventions involving sense of belonging, mindset, and values affirmation have been found to increase retention (Walton, 2014). Early retention data comparing participation in Child Development with participation in another large general education class (Introduction to Psychology) revealed that participation in Child Development may increase retention. Whereas 80% of Liberal Arts students enrolled in Child Development in 2015 are in good academic standing or have graduated, only 70% of Liberal Arts students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology are in good academic standing or have graduated. Examining only first-year students, we also found evidence of improved retention. For Liberal Arts students who began their studies in Fall 2015, the college retention rate as of Spring 2018 is 58%. First-year students who completed Introduction to Psychology in Fall 2015 have a similar retention rate of 61%. However, first-year students who completed Child Development in Fall 2015 have a retention rate of 69%. Although preliminary, these findings may indicate that participation in a single deeply engaging class can have a broad impact on students’ experience in college.

Based on our findings we have begun to hypothesize about ways in which different forms of assessment might evoke false achievement gaps. Multiple-choice test questions frequently have complicated sentence structure and vocabulary, causing poor alignment with the content being assessed. In contrast, the use of scaffolded assignments and open-ended questions that encourage students to express learning in their own words increases assignment clarity and grading equity (Singer-Freeman & Bastone, in press). We hypothesize that assessments in which students demonstrate learning in their own words vary along two dimensions that influence cultural relevance: inclusive content and utility value. When students demonstrate learning by applying content to an example, it is critical that the example and assignment structure be equally familiar to all students (inclusive). The presence of unfamiliar content can create confusion or feelings of exclusion. Students must also perceive their efforts to have value beyond credit in a class (utility value). When assignments are high in utility value, achievement gaps are eliminated (Harackiewicz, Canning, Tibbetts, Priniski, & Hyde, 2015; Singer-Freeman, Hobbs, & Robinson, 2019). We have proposed a theoretical matrix of culturally relevant assessment that makes predictions about the extent to which different forms of assessment might evoke false achievement gaps (Singer-Freeman, et al., 2019). Self-relevant writing and ePortfolio practice are high in both inclusive content and utility value, supporting the accurate assessment of competence in all students. Disciplinary writing has high utility value because it will support professional development but may lack inclusive content if the stylistic rules are more familiar to some students than to others. Inclusive projects frequently lack utility value because their primary purpose is assessment. Thus, both sorts of assignments should present moderate risk of false achievement gaps. Tests and formal essays are low in both inclusive content and utility value, creating a high risk of false achievement gaps like those reported here. Interestingly, context also matters, as indicated by our finding that an achievement gap was present in response to a traditional test setting and not in response to testing that was completed as part of an online class. See Singer-Freeman, et al. (2019) for further exploration of this model.

Self-relevant writing is a useful tool that can encourage students to integrate course material with personal experiences in the context of a large social science general education class. We believe it also has the potential to help even the playing field for students historically underrepresented in higher education because it is high in utility
value and inclusive content. The writing assignments described in this paper can serve as a model for other general education classes (see Singer-Freeman and Bastone, 2016, for a complete set of assignments and rubrics). We conclude with the following recommendations for others who wish to incorporate high-utility-value self-relevant writing assignments in large general education courses.

1. Provide opportunities to write in different genres for authentic audiences. Infuse assignments with self-relevant activities to increase utility value.

2. Curate self-relevant writing into a document that is formatted attractively or in an ePortfolio. Encourage students to save and share their work with others who are important to them.

3. Create an inclusive community. Share examples from student writing that reflect the diversity of experiences.

4. Provide proactive instructions and convey confidence in students' ability. Provide individual feedback that details weaknesses and expresses confidence in students' ability to improve.

5. Practice culturally relevant assessment. Use inclusive content, explain the utility of the assignments to students, and disaggregate assignment outcomes to reveal and address false achievement gaps.

Thoughtfully designed general education curricula can support student success and cultural inclusiveness while providing students with rich opportunities to engage in self-relevant writing. The over-reliance on testing in general education courses may limit integrative learning and disproportionately harm students from historically underrepresented groups. We believe that providing students with meaningful opportunities to engage in self-relevant writing may fundamentally alter their experience in college and lead to more authentic learning.

References


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