Teaching Methods

Newsletters as an Applied Writing Activity in Horticulture Courses

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Summary. Graduates of horticulture curricula are expected to be able to convey technical expertise in a variety of communication and writing activities. To address the need for writing competence, writing-across-the-curriculum concepts are being applied in a variety of horticulture courses. To expand writing skills in a turfgrass management course using a job-related activity, a newsletter project was assigned to students that required the students to write two articles and produce a newsletter publication.

Business leaders and industry advisors now stress the importance of the writing and communication skills of graduates. Technical competence is no longer the only requirement necessary for a student to obtain and succeed in a work position. A graduate should be able to convey expertise in a variety of communica-

tion and writing activities (Neal et al., 1991).

To address the need for writing competence, there has been an effort to expand writing skills into all academic courses. This writing-across-the-curriculum concept brings writing out of English or communications classes into other courses, including horticultural science and technical horticulture courses. This concept also engages the instructor to teach writing (Zimmerman, 1991).

Several articles have been published describing the various applications of the writing-across-the-curriculum concept in technical courses (Berghage and Lownds, 1991; Stinson, 1991; Zimmerman, 1991, 1992). Along with the traditional term paper, these applications include writing journals (Zimmerman, 1991), lab notebooks (Zimmerman, 1992), micro-themes (Berghage and Lownds, 1991), and essay exams (Stinson, 1991).

Traditional term papers are not very effective writing assignments as they have little application to most activities in horticulture business and industry. Horticulture writing assignments should reflect job-related activities. Even the term paper should be more genre-specific, such as a magazine article or extension publication (Berghage and Lownds, 1991). Newsletters also can serve as a genre-specific alternative to the traditional term paper (Flatley, 1991).

A newsletter is, in effect, a news report distributed on a periodic basis to a specialized audience. Newsletters can be purely informative or serve as a public relations tool. Often the newsletter is a mix of both. In many areas of the green industry, newsletters are an important part of target marketing (Pancoast, 1991).

Newsletters are composed of articles and other elements, including graphics and typography enhancements that combine to attract and maintain a reader's interest. Due to space constraints inherent in newsletters, writers must develop concise writing strategies to allow room for these other elements. This could help break the false assumption in which a student equates quantity with a better grade, as often is found with traditional term papers. It also encourages the student to employ a recursive writing and editing strategy.

With the increased availability of low-cost computer desktop publishing systems, there has been an increase in newsletter publishing since many small organizations and businesses now can produce a quality newsletter for their members or customers at a fraction of the cost of traditional printing services. Using computer-based systems can enhance a student's skills of not only creating the message, but also the medium that delivers the message. Encouraging students to write their articles with a word processor helps them extend their skills to producing the complete newsletter with the computer (Fluitt-Dupuy, 1989).

Computer literacy is another skill recommended by business leaders and industry advisors (Neal et al., 1991). Requiring students to use a computer to write and produce the newsletter greatly enhances these skills. Computer use in a horticulture course helps to encourage a computing-across-the-curriculum process similar to the writing-across-the-curriculum concept.

To bring writing into a horticulture class with application to job-related activities, I assigned a newsletter project with the goal to bring more writing into the course. By assigning a newsletter project, writing skills could be increased while at the same time introducing students to a communication activity they may well encounter on their job.

Project details

For the project, horticulture students wrote and published a turf management-related newsletter. The class was a second-year-level Introduction to Turfgrass Management course at a 2-year technical institute. All of the students were enrolled in 2-year Associate of Applied Science horticulture

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programs, with a majority of the students (20 out of 24) enrolled in a landscape technology program and the remainder in a greenhouse management program and a golf course management program. There was no prerequisite communications course, which resulted in the class having a wide range of communications skills, ranging from students concurrently enrolled in the first communications course to students who completed all communications courses for the their particular curriculum of study.

To demonstrate to the students that the project was not too complex, the assignment was presented as an article in a two-page newsletter containing all the basic newsletter elements (nameplate, masthead, rules, sidebars, and graphics.) The article described how the employees (i.e., the students) of a turf management company were asked to produce a newsletter for the company's clientele. The article detailed the specific requirements and responsibilities of the employees (students), which included two boxed visuals listing the due dates and available resources (Fig. 1). As an example of the type of article expected, the back page of the newsletter contained an actual turf management article on mowing.

To create a scenario the students would likely encounter in job-related article writing, the students first submitted a topic for editorial approval by me. I assisted them in developing topics that would match the newsletter readership as defined in the assignment. In addition to submitting their final draft articles for review in a standard, double-spaced, printed format required by most publications, the students were required to submit a computer file copy of the article on a diskette.

Common grammatical errors and spelling were checked by processing the computer file copy of the article with grammar checker software. The software has the capability of inserting comments into a copy of the file at the point of suspected problems without modifying the original file. The grammar checker also provided an evaluation of the reading level and readability of the article.

The printed articles were reviewed by me for content, accuracy of information, and style. Editorial comments were written on the paper copy and a

tentative grade was given for the article. Articles then were returned to the students for final editing. No grades were recorded at this point, except for meeting deadlines.

After the students wrote, reviewed, and edited their articles, they began the process of newsletter composition and layout. The students were given the option of mechanical layout and paste-up; the use of desktop publishing tools, or a combination of the two. Requiring students to submit computer-based articles enabled them to revise quickly the content and alter layout into a newsletter format without extensive retyping.

The assignment required that four articles (two from each student) along

with other necessary newsletter elements, fit onto one 11 × 17-inch (27.5 × 42.5-cm) sheet of paper. This layout would fold down to a four-page 8.5 × 11-inch (21.3 × 27.5 cm) newsletter format. Students were required to provide all the standard elements found in a newsletter, including the nameplate or title block, masthead, page numbering, and headlines. Students were encouraged to include other elements such as visuals, sidebars, and rules. Number of columns and typeface selection were left to student discretion. To aid the students, I spent some lecture and lab time discussing newsletter production.

A draft of the newsletter was submitted for editorial review a week prior

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Employees To Produce a Company Newsletter An effective tool to convey information to customers.

Robert Boufford, President of The T223 Turf Management Company has given his employees the task of producing a newsletter. The newsletter will be used to convey important information about turf management activities to the company's customers and other interested groups.

"Newsletters are an excellent way of involving student employees in providing information to customers," said Boufford, who will act as the editor-in-chief of the newsletter. Boufford also commented, "The research for the articles and writing the articles will enhance the employee's knowledge of turf management."

Each two employee are assigned to develop a 4-page newsletter containing four articles on topics of turfgrass, turf usages, turf practices and turf management. The articles will discuss current issues and practices in the broad area of turf management.

Each employee is assigned to write two articles on two different topics pertaining to turf and turf management. The article topics must be different from the partner's article topics. Four articles on a single major topic such as the various benefits of turf is not acceptable. The employees are to use the chapter titles in of the company textbook as a source for major topics.

When writing the articles, the employee must plan on each article to be 2 to 4 double spaced "pica type" pages in length. In newsletter publishing, standard 2-4 double space typed pages will shrink to 1/2 to 1+ pages of newsletter type.

The newsletter will be four pages long. The layout will be to fit on an 11" X 17" sheet of paper and folded in half to form a 4 page 8 1/2 by 11" format. This format allows for easy publication. It is also a format that will allow for quick reading by the customers during their busy schedules.

The newsletter will contain all the elements found in a typical newsletter (masthead, nameplate, page numbering, etc.) All other layout specifications such as number of columns, type selection, graphics and line art is publishers' (employees) decision.

Employees can use any tools necessary to layout the newsletter including any desktop publishing systems such as WordPerfect or PageMaker. It is highly recommended that all typing be done with a word processor so that the format can be easily changed from a standard format to a newsletter format.

There will be several resources available to the employees during the publi-

cation activity. Most of these materials are available on reserve in the library. Many of the books are on desktop publishing which will help the employee in setting up WordPerfect, the company's standard word processor as a desktop publishing system for the newsletter.

Boufford has set deadlines for the employee's articles within the next few weeks. The completed newsletter will go to print the first week in June. With distribution to the customers by June 8, 1992.

Editorial Due Dates:

First article topic:
April 24, 1992
A copy of the first article:
May 8, 1992.
Second article topic:
May 8, 1992
A copy of the second article:
May 22, 1992.
A final draft of the newsletter:
June 1, 1992.
The complete newsletter:
June 5, 1992.

Resources In the Library

Reserve Under Mrs. Alsworth,
Desktop Publishing with WordPerfect by Roger C. Parker
WordPerfect 5.1 Macros & Templates by Gordon McComb.
Reserve Under Mr. Boufford,
Desktop Publishing & Typesetting by Michael Kleper
Desktop Publishing by Davis, Barry and Wiesenber.
Newsletters: A guide to editing, design and production by Promotional Perspectives.
Other Resources
Any WordPerfect manuals and books
Books on writing and publishing
Trade journals.

Fig. 1. The newsletter assignment in a newsletter layout to demonstrate the expected finished product.

to the final due date. Editorial comments and suggestions were directed towards newsletter layout and other publishing details. No grade was given except for meeting deadlines.

Students submitted the final newsletter for a grade. An evaluation form was developed for content, mechanics of article, and production, with each article being graded separately using a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 excellent. Content scores carried the greatest weight.

To obtain written feedback from the students, three evaluation questions requiring three responses were included in the final exam. The three questions were:

- List three things you learned from the newsletter project
- List three problems you encountered during the newsletter project
- List three things you would change or add for the next newsletter project.

Enough room was given for one- to two-sentence comments for each of the nine total responses.

Results

Overall, the project met the established goal of introducing writing-across-the-curriculum activities into a turfgrass management course. I found several of the newsletter articles to be of a similar quality to those written by landscape industry managers for association newsletters. One student's article was of sufficient quality to publish in a lawn care association newsletter. Through informal observations, the library staff reported the students spent as much time researching their newsletter articles as was typically given traditional term paper assignments.

There were some problems encountered during the project. Several students did not research their chosen topic in advance to determine if it was appropriate for a newsletter article. Most of the topics were too broad in scope; a few were not appropriate for the intended readership. By requiring the students to submit the topic prior to writing the article, it was anticipated that they would apply critical thinking skills in developing a focused article topic appropriate to the intended readership. For the second article, the majority of the submitted topics were developed better.

A problem with writing projects in many horticulture courses, particularly courses taught in a 2-year program, is the wide range of student writing capabilities due to the lack of prerequisite writing courses. Also, because of course scheduling differences, prior communications course experience of students in the turf management class ranged from having no previous college-level communications courses to having completed all of the communications courses required for their particular curriculum. This was reflected in the quality of writing from the students.

Most of the responses to the question three things learned from the project related to newsletter production, computer usage, the benefits of newsletters for customer contact, and increased knowledge of turfgrass management, with a majority of the responses involving newsletter publishing. Many commented on the extensive work involved in producing a newsletter, from planning to writing to final layout. Many realized a newsletter cannot be a last-minute project. Other comments included learning new uses of the word processor software.

For the question on problems encountered in the project, most of the comments again centered on newsletter production and related computer usage. A majority of the problems could be attributed to lack of experience in using the computer and limited design skills.

As to the question on things you would change or add, some of the suggested changes included providing more time to work on the project, giving more assistance in desktop publishing skills, and requiring only one article.

Discussion

As a first-time project, I have no personal foundation for comparison with previous newsletter projects, but there were similarities to experiences reported by others (Flatley, 1991; Fluit-Dupuy, 1989). When compared to my experience with term papers, there were the same student protests of not enough time, papers too long, and too much work, even though the two articles were of the same combined length of a typical 8- to 10-page term paper.

Because several of the comments centered on difficulty with newsletter production and computer usage, predeveloped word processor templates and macros (mini programs) for newsletter production could be provided to the students to simplify and automate the newsletter production process. An extension of providing templates would be to require students to use a desktop publishing (DTP) application, as there are several low-cost DTP applications available for basic newsletter production.

Conclusion

Writing is an important skill now demanded by business and industry leaders of our students. Traditional term papers are not effective, as they have little application to most activities in horticulture business and industry. Using newsletters as an alternative to the term paper enhances the students' writing skills in their course of study while providing experience in an applied business communication practice.

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