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It's not on the Syllabus: The case for policy writing in modern graduate education

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It's not on the Syllabus: The case for policy writing in modern graduate education

Cover Page Footnote

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It's *not* on the Syllabus: The case for policy writing in modern graduate education

Introduction and Rationale

Kuh (2008) identified writing-intensive courses as a high impact educational practice and argued that writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum is central to developing information literacy. This is not only applicable at the undergraduate level, but is an essential part of graduate studies. There are countless books, blogs, websites, and videos that provide tips on becoming a better academic writer at the graduate level. Graduate students gain experience writing papers, doing research, and even grant-writing. However, not all graduate programs stress writing, and policy writing is less common although it is applicable to a variety of disciplines and is in demand in many workplace settings. Policy writing is an “authentic” assessment (see Race, 2015) compared to a more standardized assessment (e.g., performance exams), because it gives students an opportunity to transfer knowledge and skills learned throughout a course or program to other contexts, and it encourages the type of professional writing that is often needed in careers after college. Policy writing provides students with higher-order thinking skills by teaching them how to analyze ideas, solve problems, and evaluate claims (Bhasin & Butcher, 2022; Pennock, 2011).

Policy is a part of the larger feminist discourse that is not just academic, but grounded in action or change-oriented principles. Because of this, policy writing should be approached from a feminist perspective. There is a wealth of feminist scholarship spanning several decades that problematizes policy writing and argues for a more nuanced approach. Mazur's (1999) feminist comparative policy (FCP) and more recent work on theorizing feminist policy (Mazur, 2002, 2017) provides a framework for considering policy development, adoption, and evaluation. Likewise, McPhail (2003) developed the feminist policy analysis framework to examine policy from a gender lens and argues that no policy can be totally objective or value-neutral. Kanenberg et al. (2019) extended this conceptual framework by incorporating privilege, oppression, and intersectionality as guiding principles in policy discourse and analysis.

Policy writing can be conceptualized as a critical feminist praxis that connects theory and practice, and we need well trained graduate students to enter into policy conversations that understand and consider the larger implications of research and evidenced-based policy decisions. Feminist pedagogy can assist with the teaching of policy writing because it turns the classroom into a participatory, democratic space where the instructor serves as a guide while students consider solutions or change-oriented practices that can be liberatory to others. From a feminist pedagogical approach, policy writing assignments are empowering strategies because they encourage students to find their own voice in the way they consider and propose solutions while also increasing empathetic understanding (Shrewsbury, 1987). Policy writing encourages the development of a community of learners among graduate students that reinforces both self-autonomy and mutuality with others in conceptualizing solutions to pressing issues. Lastly, policy writing develops graduate students' leadership skills, which according to Shrewsbury (1987) are the “embodiment of our ability and our willingness to act on our beliefs” (p. 11).

Through policy writing, graduate students can use their disciplinary skills in more applied work to engage in important conversations related to their field of study – conversations that have a huge impact on people's lives at different levels (local, state, federal, and international) and may disproportionately affect marginalized and minoritized populations. With instruction and practice, graduate students can learn how to take a stance on an issue, develop evidence-

based solutions, and advocate for or against programs (Pennock, 2021). Policy writing generates high quality information, promotes good decision-making (Mintrom, 2012), and helps graduate students see how difficult the decision-making process actually is (Falconer & MacDonald, 2020).

Learning Objectives

There are a variety of learning objectives that can be associated with policy writing assignments. Graduate students should be able to 1) identify a topic or problem relevant to their discipline; 2) describe the current state of policy related to the identified topic or problem; 3) analyze the evidence and efficacy of current policy for the identified topic or problem; and 4) propose policy solutions addressing the identified topic or problem.

Explanation

Policy writing can take on many forms and includes statements, memos, briefs, and policy analyses or reports. While policy memos tend to be shorter (e.g., less than 10 pages) and policy briefs are longer with more detail, there is much overlap between the two and the terms “memo” and “brief” are often used interchangeably in the literature and in practice (Judge, 2021). For graduate students, a typical policy writing assignment would use either a memo or brief. Memos and briefs evaluate different policy options for an issue with a specific policy audience in mind (Boys & Keating, 2009). As such, the goal of policy writing is different than a research paper because the writer is trying to persuade the audience to act on an issue through the information and conclusions that are drawn (Pennock, 2011). The audience is often informed, non-experts (e.g., elected officials, bureaucrats, the media) who do not have the time to do independent research on the issue, but who have to decide actions to take regarding the issue.

Knowing the audience is key for graduate students when they do an assignment like this. Pennock (2019) suggests becoming audience-centered when writing policy, which will help focus graduate students when they complete a policy memo or brief for the first time. To accomplish this, they should consider the following questions as a guiding framework for writing a policy memo or brief:

1. What does the audience already know about the topic?
2. What crucial knowledge are they missing?
3. Why does the audience care about the topic and how much do they care?
4. What type of document and format will help the audience process the information quickly and concisely?

When considering these questions, graduate students will want to write in a way that the reader will understand the first time and in the way that was intended. Language should be clear, concise, simple (e.g., everyday words), and straightforward so that non-experts will understand the issue and proposed solutions without any possible confusion. The memo or brief should be written in the present tense and with short sentences that are to the point and avoid disciplinary or specialty jargon. The goal is to communicate effectively while also taking a stance on an issue.

In general, a policy memo or brief defines the problem or issue at hand, describes its background, and provides options that policy makers could pursue to resolve the problem.

Policy writing is structured and policy memos and briefs follow a similar format. Since memos are shorter, they often begin with the problem or the main point or take-away while a policy brief begins with an executive summary and more formal introduction. The next section for both a memo and brief focuses on the background information including any relevant history and why the issue is important. This is followed by the research evidence. This section clarifies rigorous sources of information, including the data sources, and what affects the problem. Visuals are often used in this section to summarize and illustrate the breadth and depth of the research. Since the policy brief is longer, there would be more extensive research evidence. The recommendations and solutions section should explain the implications of the research and how specific policy recommendations and social action would address the problem. Key resources are included that are important for the reader or policy-maker to have access to. The memo or brief should have headings to differentiate the sections and can include infographics when appropriate.

Judge (2021) describes a heuristic framework with five key components that can be used to design and implement policy writing assignments. These include embeddedness, primary learning aim, writing scenario, student guidance and support, and ensuring a feedback loop. The questions below are useful to ask yourself when designing a policy writing assignment (Judge, 2021).

1. Embeddedness: Where will the assignment fit within the course? Do my students have any previous experience writing this way? If not, how will I scaffold this learning?
2. Primary learning aim: What is the primary learning aim of the assignment? Do I want to focus more on the technical writing skills, the development of higher-order thinking skills, or both? Do I want to see specific applications of disciplinary concepts or foci? How does this connect to course-level learning objectives and outcomes?
3. The writing scenario: Do I want to give them a particular writing scenario or let them pick a topic or issue? How will my choice of the policy writing scenario be connected to my primary learning aims and how will this affect the way my students understand the assignment?
4. Student guidance and support: How will I provide guidance to my students? What supports (e.g., examples, peer review, use of on-campus resources such as research consultations or writing center) will they need to be successful with this assignment? Some helpful examples can be found at the UC-Davis Center for Policy & Inequality Research (<https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/policy-briefs>), the United Nations Association National Capital Area Chapter (<https://www.unanca.org/our-work/advocacy/policy-memos-and-issue-briefs>), and the Journal of Health and Social Behavior (<https://www.asanet.org/publications/journals/journal-of-health-and-social-behavior-policy-briefs/>).
5. Ensuring a feedback loop: How will I evaluate the implementation of this assignment? Am I reflecting on the process along the way? What did my students struggle with? How do I plan on modifying the assignment?

Falconer and MacDonald (2020) suggest using instructor-led workshops to teach about the policy writing process. For example, they provide students with three policy memos and they work in groups to identify each section, compare and contrast the memos, and evaluate the effectiveness of each one. This gives students an opportunity to evaluate their own understanding of the policy memo and engage in dialogue with others in a scaffolded approach. It can also be helpful to work with your library to create resource guides to help with the assignment.

Debriefing

Policy writing can increase student motivation and engagement, but this is often a new way for even graduate students to write so they will need instruction. Pennock (2011) suggests having an explicit discussion with students on policy writing before the assignment because they do not know how to intuitively create policy memos or briefs. It is important to have examples of memos or briefs for students to dissect and critique, and to hold question and answer sessions with students to create open dialogue around generating solutions. Instructors can also build in debriefing along the way with their students to help increase their comfortability discussing their thought process behind the suggested policy recommendations and any struggles that they may have with the writing style and format.

Assessment

Citing Race (2015), Judge (2021) suggests that policy writing is a more “authentic” assessment than other assessments because of its applicability to professional settings and that it encourages synthesis (e.g., drawing connections among ideas), evaluation (e.g., justify a stand or position), and creation (e.g., producing new or original work). It can be used as a formative assessment during a course of study or as a summative assessment at the end of a unit or course. This will depend on your overall course design and learning objectives. Judge’s (2021) heuristic framework is helpful in considering how to embed a policy writing assignment within a course, which will determine whether it is used as a formative or summative assessment. When assessing a policy writing assignment, an analytic rubric will be useful since it identifies specific criteria for a student to be evaluated on and these criteria can match up to the components in a policy memo and brief. For example, the criteria may include clarity of the problem, sufficient background information, use of research evidence, feasibility of recommendations, and appropriate key resources. The overall writing quality (conciseness, organization, and flow) should also be included in the rubric since this is an integral part of the policy writing.

While graduate students often get opportunities to develop their writing throughout their education, policy writing is less common. This article aims to make the case that policy writing is imperative for modern graduate education. Policy writing provides graduate students with transferrable skills that are applicable in a variety of career settings. Graduate students become a part of larger disciplinary conversations that extend beyond the academy and discover the nuances of public discourse. Feminist pedagogy can guide the implementation of policy writing assignments throughout the curriculum by modeling a participatory, democratic space where the instructor serves as a guide and empowers students to develop solutions to critical contemporary issues.

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