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Helping the Students Write What They Want to Say

Monika Shehi, Ph.D.

I'M SURE MANY of us have been there. We give out our paper assignment, we explain in detail to our students the requirements for the assignment, we have lengthy and sometimes vigorous class discussions to help them explore their ideas, and we look forward to reading the papers--only to find out that few, if any, of the good ideas that emerged during class discussions made it to writing. It is natural to wonder what happened to them. Are oral discussions a waste of time? Why don't they lead to good writing? What can help the students with the actual writing of the paper? Last year, as I was struggling to understand the gap between what we discussed in class and what my students had articulated in writing, it occurred to me that I could do more to show them how to start organizing the ideas that were swirling in their heads into a structured and coherent written argument. After all, as we are all well aware, an academic paper is a very different forum than the oral classroom discussion, and presenting ideas in one forum is not the same as articulating them in the other.

A cooking metaphor may illustrate the problem. Imagine if Martha Stewart stood in front of her television audience, and instead of showing them how to prepare a delicious German chocolate cake step by step, she only presented them with the ingredients neatly laid out on the table, a perfect cake she had baked the night before, and a long detailed description of how the cake should taste. Classroom discussions are not only helpful but necessary to help the students brainstorm a topic and fully explore an issue. However, the ideas those discussions generate are only the ingredients of a written argument. Students still need to be shown how to put those ingredients together to produce a fully developed argument.

With that realization in mind, I set out to model the writing process for my students. Using the smart board, I took them along for the ride. I opened a blank Word Document and projected it on the screen. I allowed all of us to look at that intimidating white space for a moment. How to fill it out with perfect sentences that neatly followed one another into a complete argument? Where to start? I suggested to my students that a good place to start would be the thesis statement, the piece that tied the whole paper together. Then I formed an outline with the main ideas that I wanted to articulate.

After finishing the outline, I started fleshing out just a part of it, much as Martha Stewart might put all other parts of the cake aside and take the time to show her audience how to prepare the frosting. And just as she would not show the audience every tedious detail involved in preparing the whole cake, I did not make my students watch me as I worked through every point of my paper. But I showed them enough to give them a clear idea of how to prepare each component and then brought to class a final version of the whole paper.

There was one difference between me and Martha Stewart, however. As a matter of fact, it might be more apt to compare myself to Julia Childs. Not because I would like to claim her expertise, but because Julia was not afraid of showing the mistakes. And neither was I. As a matter of fact, the mistakes were part of the point I was trying to make. I intentionally did not start writing my paper before class. I wanted to start from scratch in front of my students. And as I started first outlining and then piecing the paper together, I notice that they were surprised to see that their writing instructor didn't seem to know exactly what she was doing all the time. She was up there, second-guessing a word choice, making silly typos, misspelling words on occasions, looking stuff up, deleting phrases or sometimes whole sentences, fumbling, starting all over again and again. That was precisely what I wanted them to see. I wanted to impress upon them that writing is a process, that no one produces perfect versions at first attempt, and that they did not have to feel discouraged if they didn't know exactly what they wanted to write from the get go. They could piece it together little by little, just as I was doing, working from a rough draft and revising it again and again until a vague idea achieved clarity and precision and generated the next idea, until transitions between points began standing out, until the whole argument started coming into focus and they could focus on the pleasure of fine-tuning individual sentences.

see **WRITE**, Page 2

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Five Lessons on Changing Someone's Mind (or "Evidence Ain't Everything")

AS SCIENTISTS, WE PROFESS to the sanctity of evidence: repeatable, unambiguous observation underlies any conclusions we make about how the world works. But anybody who has tried to change someone's mind, to convince them that a belief held doesn't match the facts, knows from bitter experience that facts do not act symmetrically. Instead, a "fact" that further cements a current belief into place has much more weight than a fact that contradicts long-held belief. The difficulty of the task of changing someone's mind, and hints on how we might do it, are the subject of a book by Howard Gardner. Gardner is a cognitive scientist with a long track record of exploring how we think and learn. He's a real resource for the young academic who wants to be a better teacher (and I use the word teacher in the broad sense here).

In his [2006] book, Gardner discusses the mind-changing paradox:

People underestimate how difficult it is to change minds. The mind-changing paradox is my attempt to capture that. When you're little, your mind changes pretty readily, even if nobody pushes it. We are natural mind-changing entities until we are 10 or so. But as we get older and have acquired more formal and informal knowledge, then it's very, very hard to change our minds. Which doesn't mean you should give up. It means you need to be intelligent and strategic about it and persevering.

I'm not stating that on small matters it's difficult to change people's minds. A coffee break at 3:00 rather than 1:00—that's trivial. But on fundamental ideas on how the world works, about what your enterprise is about, about what your life goals are, about what it takes to survive—it's on these topics that it's very difficult to change people's minds. Most people, by the time they're adults, not only have become used to a certain way of thinking, but in a sense it's work for them [to change] because their neural pathways become set.

1. Changing someone's long-held belief may require actual rewiring of the brain. When confronting a skeptic on global warming or biological evolution, its easy to get frustrated. After all, facts are facts. But have some empathy. If you have been taught since childhood to distrust "intellectuals", or that "Darwin=Satan", its likely there are collections of neurons that assist you in this task. This may take some time, and a deft touch.
2. Think glass houses. Each of us has some long-held beliefs of our own. One of the things we should be proud of as scientists is that we acknowledge such shortcomings and use a variety of techniques, including strong controls, double-blind tests, and strong inference (the method of multiple hypotheses) to counter them. And we use these anti-bias tools every chance we get, right?
3. Think a variety of evidence, presented in a variety of ways. Most scientists I know will be profoundly skeptical when they hear a seminar that clearly contradicts a long-held belief. Sometimes this skepticism borders on dismissive. But even the healthy skeptic will put up some firewalls. She will say, "I'll believe it when I see it in print.", "I'll believe it when I see a different kind of experiment", "I'll believe it when I see similar results from another lab." or, ultimately, "I'll believe it when I repeat these results on my own.". This is good and healthy. Now imagine convincing a roomful of skeptical undergraduates in an oil state that humans are contributing to global warming (especially after an ice storm). It may take a similar variety of evidence. Here's Gardner:

But there are at least two things whose importance is underestimated. One is the lever of what I call representational redescriptions. Get the message out in lots and lots of different ways, lots of different symbol systems, lots of different intelligences and lots of different embodiments. The notion that you say it once and it gets through is just wrong. So is the notion that you can simply repeat yourself. You have to be extremely resourceful in finding diverse ways to get the same desired mind-change across.

Teaching is all about presenting evidence in a variety of ways. There are few "aha!" moments that occur in the classroom (but they do help keep ya goin').

4. This is hard, important work in which you are swimming upstream. Many of the most important things we as scientists need to communicate go against deep belief systems. In these cases, for a student to discover, then admit, that she was wrong means that the teacher, preacher, or parents that taught you this stuff was wrong. This is tough stuff people. Gardner again:

The second [most important] thing is that people underestimate just how powerful resistances are. There are three factors involved in resistances: age, emotion and public stance. First of all, the longer your neural networks have been running one way, the harder it is to rewire them. Unfortunately, that's just a fact of life. Number two, the things that you feel very strongly about emotionally are the hardest to change your mind about. And three, particularly for people who are in public life, are things on which you've taken a public stand. That's hard to reverse.

5. Don't be discouraged; education is cumulative. As a scientist and educator, your job is to plant the seed of scientific truth in a clever and compassionate way. Sometimes that seed will wither and die. Sometimes, it will be nourished by another clever, compassionate teacher downstream. And sometimes, and you will never know how many times, that seed will grow long after your encounter with your student.

So in the words of Winston Churchill:

"Never, never, never, never–in nothing, great or small, large or petty–never give in, except to convictions of honour and good sense. "

This is one of our greatest responsibilities. It is also one of our greatest challenges. And it is work that needs to be done.

Dr. Mike Kaspari, Director of the Graduate Program in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Oklahoma, Five Lessons on Changing Someone's Mind, Blog: Getting Things Done in Academia, January 14, 2007 [http://eebatou.wordpress.com/2007/01/14/five-lessons-on-changing-someones-mind-or-evidence-aint-everything/], November 15, 2010.

WRITE

Continuing from Page 1

The difference was clear. That is not to say that all my students were ready to host their own cooking show, so to speak--though there were a few who could have. The main difference was that most of them wrote coherent arguments with visible structures and a clear awareness of the stylistic differences between conversational and written language. Undoubtedly, our work does not stop there and there are quite a few other areas of argument development that our students need help with. However, taking the time to model the writing process can help them tremendously in successfully transitioning from what's in their head to what they put on paper—or to put in their words, from what they want to say to what they actually write.

Assignment in PDF format.
Exercise in PDF format.

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