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Spotlight Interviews on Writing Assignments for *Into Thin Air*: David Zehr, Kim Smith & Shane Cutler, and Susan Noel Share Their Approaches

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In December 1998, the First Year Task Force chose Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* as a common reading for all incoming first-year students. First-year orientation sessions (held in June and August) included a discussion of the first chapter of the book. IAC instructors were asked to include discussion of the book in their classes, and a number of instructors included writing assignments concerning the book in their IAC curricula. Towards the end of the Fall semester 1999, IAC instructors were e-mailed and asked to share any writing assignment(s) they had used with *Into Thin Air*. What follows are three "spotlight" interviews with IAC instructors which show a variety of approaches that can be taken with a writing assignment. These interviews provide successful models for those who wish to include writing assignments in the future, not only in IAC, but also in other courses, and when viewed together they bring to light common methods that are often the foundation of successful writing assignments.

David Zehr's Approach

Over the eight weeks of his IAC course this fall, Psychology professor David Zehr had his IAC students write eight one-page papers in response to articles they read, such as "The Earthly Use of a Liberal Education" and "The Computer Delusion." These regular writings were basically freewrites, intended to help students engage with the readings. The two page response to *Into Thin Air* was similar; however, when assigning the paper David used the occasion to present his students with the basic point that most academic writing involves rethinking and therefore rewriting, a point that, as David puts it, "most of them had probably not learned in high school."

David's assignment asked students to choose a theme that interested them from the list developed by the First Year Task Force, themes such as knowing when a goal is wise and worthwhile, and recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of group decision making. They were then asked to write a two-page first draft in which they discussed what they had learned about the theme by reading *Into Thin Air* and how the theme related to their own life experiences, as well as describing their personal reactions to the book. In all parts of the paper they were encouraged to use specific examples from the book to support their assertions. A completed first draft was required in one week, at which time they would all go visit the College Writing Center.

To present this writing assignment David did a great deal of talking to his class about drafts and about what a first draft entails. A first draft, he explained, is a work-in-progress, written without concern for grammar and mechanics. It is a start, a getting out of ideas, a beginning. Nobody writes a perfect first draft, not even professors. David at this time shared with his students some of his writing projects and writing experiences, what his first drafts were like, the rewriting he did, the feedback he got from others, and how he used that to reconsider and revise. In college, David told them, you will need to get used to the idea of revising your writing, and the place on campus that can help you with this is the College Writing Center.

"I wanted my IAC students to learn about the College Writing Center not from a canned tour," says David, "but from an actual experience in which they used it." Students, therefore, were required to have a first draft of their papers on the day the class visited the CWC.

At the College Writing Center, David's students shared their first drafts in small groups of peers and writing consultants. The writing consultants gave response that focused on what the drafts seemed to be saying and whether or not the requirements of the assignment were met. Response was supportive and encouraging, focused in ways that helped writers consider where in their drafts they might want to revise.

"My workload for this assignment," says David, "was minimal. I read and commented on 19 two-page papers, and the personal element made them particularly enjoyable to read." David was primarily positive with his comments, giving them bits of praise like "I agree with you here," or "Yes!" or "This is a well-articulated thought." He also noted places where he would like to have heard more or would like to have seen a supporting example from the book. Papers were graded check for adequate, or check minus if they needed to do another draft. (Just two or three students received check minuses.)

Next year David plans to give a similar assignment but grade the papers. Some wrote beautiful papers while others wrote only enough to fulfill the assignment, and he would like to reinforce those who put in extra effort. Also, next time he would like to require a third draft, but he's not sure if he can schedule that. Overall, what David liked most about the experience of assigning this paper was that it reinforced two of his beliefs: that it is very important early on to have students learn about the importance of writing, and that IAC can be a course with meaningful academic experience that relates to their other academic work.

Kim Smith & Shane Cutler's Approach

Early on in the semester, Kim Smith, Director of Alumni Relations, and Shane Cutler, Assistant Director of Student Activities and Greek Life, who team teach IAC, polled their students and discovered that over half of them had no meaningful book in their lives. Apparently, these students had no idea how to make personal value out of what they read. About *Into Thin Air* they said, "I'm not going to climb a mountain, so why do I have to read this book?"

Kim and Shane wanted to teach students how to look at what they were reading and think about how it applied to themselves. This, the instructors explained to their students, involves going beyond the simple story to the themes or ideas of the book and asking, "Is this the truth for me?" Even for those who did not enjoy the read, there was something to be gained by figuring out what themes from *Into Thin Air* could be applied to their own lives.

To foster a personal connection with the read, Kim and Shane developed a journaling writing assignment. As they explained on their assignment sheet, "Journaling in this class is much more personal and conversational than most papers, and it's really not a very difficult assignment to do. Journals help individuals to reflect on a reading, an experience, or life in general. Journals help people to connect academic ideas to their personal lives—it is a record of how you see the world, based on what you have learned."

The actual assignment asked students to write a journal entry, two pages minimum, in which they reflected on the book and what it meant to them. Common themes in the book were mentioned, and students were asked which one they related to and which ones they could relate to their experiences at Plymouth State College so far. As the assignment sheet stated, "This journal is a chance for you to tell us (and yourself) what personal meaning you got out of *Into Thin Air*."

Despite a carefully crafted assignment sheet, many students were initially unsure about how to write a paper that asked them to take control of their learning. "How long should the paper be?" and "What should I write about?" were repeatedly asked questions.

"What you write about and how long you make it is up to you," the instructors kept replying, and gradually all students got the idea. "Meaningful learning," Kim says, "is taking something from the outside and making it internal. By writing about it and applying it to themselves, the students can get more from the text and control what they're learning and processing."

Once the students got used to the approach, Kim and Shane saw some exciting developments. "Orally, some students complained about the read," says Kim, "but students probably appreciated the book more after writing about it. Their papers showed that they had made some personal meaning, and they did not complain about the read in their papers."

Most students wrote about motivation and perseverance. For example, one student wrote about his experiences trying out for an athletic team at PSC. No matter how badly one session may have gone, he kept going back and working towards the ultimate goal of making the team. He related this to the Everest climb. No matter how tired the climbers were, no matter how many setbacks they had, they kept climbing. In his paper this student went on to discuss how perseverance would be necessary to stay on the team and to succeed in other aspects of life at Plymouth, too.

About half of the students received five points by taking drafts of their papers to the College Writing Center for a read. "Next year," says Kim, "we will require the writing center visit because the papers of those who went were much better than the others." Kim and Shane each read half of the papers and wrote comments in the margins. They gave points for how well the students had taken themes from the book and demonstrated personal meaning, how well they structured their papers, and how well they used correct spelling and grammar.

The workload for each instructor was about half an hour to create the assignment, half an hour to convey the assignment to students (spread over several different class meetings when the instructors asked if there were any more questions about the assignment and students frequently asked more), and about two hours to read

and comment meaningfully on the papers.

Kim and Shane will definitely use this writing assignment again, as it helped their students make personal meaning out of the assigned book. Also, next time, like this semester, they will assign weekly readings from *Education of Character: Lessons for Beginners* by Will Keim and require regular in-class journal entries on the chapters because those writings, like the one on *Into Thin Air*, allowed their students to make personal meaning out of what they had read.

Susan Noel's Approach

Susan Noel, Library Associate, created her writing assignment on *Into Thin Air* to fulfill several goals. "This assignment," she says, "connected the book to other aspects of the IAC course so it wasn't just a required book floating out there."

Susan had each of her students find a website, any website, that in some way connected to the content of *Into Thin Air*. The paper, a minimum of two pages, was a discussion of the website, a description of how the website was found, and an explanation of the connection made between the website and the book. As the assignment sheet and Susan's oral instructions made clear, the paper had to include a cut-and-pasted passage from the website, as well as the website address. It was also specified that the final paper be printed at a college cluster, and that it meet all format expectations of a standard college paper: one inch margins, standard font size, and double spacing.

Susan's assignment developed from her use of the new IAC computer module with her class, which has freed up her class timewise. Now she does not spend class time teaching students how to double space and format disks because the module covers that. But, she is quick to point out, even though they pass the IAC computer module, they still might not know how to use the college's word-processing technology and produce a standard college paper. This assignment makes sure students do know how to use the resources

available by taking them through a model of a paper producing process that they might use in any college course.

The assignment also bolstered a class discussion of *Into Thin Air*. Students brought in two printed pages from their chosen website, and that opened a discussion of many things connected with the book. "Several kids brought in stuff about the Sherpas," says Susan. "They felt the Sherpas were mistreated and exploited, while others took a different position and a discussion opened up from that." Some students brought in really surprising and interesting things. For example, one student brought in the actual equipment list for the climb that he'd found on a webpage. With web material they brought to class, students supplied the content for class discussions on the book, and in this way the class became more student-centered, and students experienced the confidence-building fulfillment of taking initiative.

Drafts of the papers were due a week after the discussion. "I didn't tell them about the College Writing Center visit," says Susan. "I just required a draft of the paper for class on that day. I wanted them to visit the writing center with writing in their hands."

At the writing center, students shared their drafts aloud in small groups of peers led by a writing consultant. Students experienced the feel of their writing being listened to and taken as real communication. Their interests and ideas were responded to in conversations that encouraged them to talk more about their topics. These conversations affirmed the work they had done reading, researching, and writing, and encouraged some to further develop their papers and clarify their ideas.

After the writing center visit, students put their papers into final draft form and passed them in. "I read the papers, but loosely," says Susan. "If they were interesting, I read them carefully. If not, I skimmed." In the margins she wrote comments like, "Hey, this is interesting," and "I haven't thought of that before," as well as other casual remarks about the content, but she made no evaluation or judgment of their ideas. "Students don't get much feedback from professors with no grade attached, just like people back and forth,"

says Susan, "and this assignment allowed that."

Credit, which was required for passing the course, was given when they completed the process. If their papers were properly formatted, printed out on a college cluster printer, included a web address, and had a webpage passage cut-and-pasted cleanly, then they passed. "I got an assortment of peculiarly printed out webpages and papers," says Susan. "Some whipped through the assignment. Others had the usual problems students run into like they lost stuff because they didn't save, or they were unable to open files, or they didn't know how to double space, or they forgot to write down the website address. I helped them along, and eventually they got it all right, and through that experience they learned some basic things that will be useful to them throughout their college careers."

Susan says she would do this assignment again because she feels there's real value when students go out and find something that interests them. There was no extra work for her to speak of, and doing the paper fulfilled lots of valuable things. Her main piece of advice to others who assign it is this: "You need to be very concrete about the things you want in a writing assignment like this one, both concrete to the students and in your own mind."

Common Elements of the Three Approaches

These three successful writing assignments offer excellent models for others who decide to include writing assignments in their classes. Looking at all three together, common elements become apparent:

1) Give students the opportunity to choose a topic of personal interest
2) Incorporate stages of a writing process into the assignment
3) Encourage use of the College Writing Center
4) Respond to the content of the papers as an interested reader
5) Make the assignment requirements clear (written)
6) Hold students to your expectations

Though no list of methods can absolutely assure success, these six methods practiced together are likely, as they did with David Zehr, Kim Smith & Shane Cutler, and Susan Noel, to result in a successful experience for others who decide to assign writing in their classes.