

Use of Peer Feedback in Teaching Analytical Writing to Bright MBA Students

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Working on reader feedback is essential for honing one's analytical writing. Many bright MBA students, however, have difficulty accepting the writing instructor's critical comments because they believe that their analytical skills are excellent and that their writing reflects it. This paper discusses the challenge of teaching analytical writing to such students and describes an exploratory use of peer feedback to improve the acceptability of instructor feedback. Key words: analytical writing, peer feedback.

Introduction

The quality of non-routine managerial decisions is determined largely by the depth and correctness of the analysis on which they are built. Managers with unerring analytical skills – managers who can read their business situation accurately and see the underlying connections that others do not – are therefore in great demand everywhere. Business schools look out for candidates who display high levels of these skills. Formal and informal training that students of management receive at these schools refines their analytical skills further.

Superior analytical ability does not, however, translate itself automatically into rigorous and readable analytical writing that guides the reader smoothly along the lines of the writer's thinking. That is probably why the Graduate Management Admission Council includes Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) as a distinct component in GMAT. It also points to the need for teaching analytical writing.

This paper discusses the challenge of teaching analytical writing to students of the MBA program at Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA), a premier graduate school of management in India, and about the author's exploratory attempt at using peer feedback to lower some of the barriers to mastery in analytical writing.

Analytical writing – contextual and non-contextual

AWA does not necessarily test the kind of analytical writing managers need to convince others of their decisions and recommendations. Critics such as Rogers and Rymer (2001), for instance, argue that the analytical writing tested by AWA is academic, decontextualized, and unsuitable for business students who have to respond to specific contexts and anticipate the consequences of their recommendations for various stakeholders. In other words, managerial analytical writing should not only be coherent internally but also, in Spivey's words (as cited in Rogers & Rymer, 2001, p. 116), "appropriate for the communicative context."

Without joining the debate on the validity and relevance of AWA, several scholars emphasize the need for a specific organizational context for teaching managerial writing. Stearns, Greenlee, and Crespy (2003), for example, recommend case-based in-basket writing exercises because they “not only offer students the opportunity to practice the kinds of writing that professionals use every day but also show students how to translate their disciplinary learning into meaningful action that requires sophisticated analysis of context, audience, purpose, and knowledge” (p. 213).

Teaching managerial analytical writing at IIMA

Recognizing that managerial analytical writing should be contextual and decision-oriented, IIMA’s two-year MBA program introduced a required writing course, ‘Written Analysis of Cases’ over forty years ago. It consisted of nine cycles of student writing and instructor feedback spread over all three terms of the first year. In each cycle students would analyze a case thoroughly, define the managerial problem in it, generate alternative ways of solving it, evaluate them using criteria derived from the analysis, recommend the best course of action, and outline the plan of action they envisaged. Then they would write it out in the form of a 1000-word report. Instructors would read these reports and give each student detailed written feedback on the content and presentation pointing out strengths and weaknesses, especially gaps in analysis, claims without support, poor logic, lack of clarity, verbosity, errors in grammar, improper tone, and inappropriate style.

This course has remained part of the required curriculum without a break although it was renamed ‘Written Analysis and Communication’ (WAC), and the duration reduced in recent years by one-third. It now consists of six cycles of writing and feedback spread over two terms, the first and the third. The methodology remains the same. There are, however, some differences. Now students are assigned a role in the case such as the protagonist and are asked to address the report to a pre-specified character in the case, often the protagonist’s boss or subordinates. Detailed instructor feedback includes comments on how appropriate the writing is to the intended reader.

While four of these reports continue to be case-based and focus on analysis leading to decision-making in the given managerial context, the other two have a broader framework. In one of them students write a 1500-word research article for publication in a journal and in the other they prepare a comprehensive 4000-word report on a company and industry of their choice. These two assignments also call for rigorous analytical writing with a specific focus. In the article, for example, students present the data they gather on a specific theme, their analysis of the data, and their conclusions. In the company-industry report, students have to map or profile an industry and select a company in it. Then they have to analyze that company and locate it on the industry map vis-à-vis industry standards and one other company, generally its nearest competitor.

WAC can be called a course in writing across the curriculum because students are expected to bring into their analysis the knowledge and insights they gain from the different business disciplines they are exposed to. WAC instructors do seek the help of professors of other disciplines when the need arises.

Student response to instructor feedback and evaluation

During reunions IIMA alumni publicly declare that WAC was one of the most useful and influential courses they had taken during their MBA and gratefully acknowledge the role it played in shaping their managerial thinking and writing. While doing the course, however, many students are highly critical of instructor feedback irrespective of who the instructor is. They perceive detailed written comments and grades as arbitrary and flowing more from instructors' inability to understand and appreciate what they have written than from any inherent problem in the reports. They are dismayed by the absence of correlation between the hard work they put in and the grades they receive. They do not see a clear upward progression in their grades from one cycle to the next. It is not unusual for a few students to see their grades come down as the course progresses. Many believe they learn little from this time-consuming exercise. Some frustrated students even suggest that this holy cow be eliminated from the core program.

The students' reluctance to accept the detailed written feedback and grades provided typically by a team of two readers – a professor and an academic associate – from the department of communication is probably due to factors such as the following. The students come with a brilliant academic record. According to IIMA Admissions Office records, most of them are from the top two percent of a very large number of candidates (170,894 in 2006; 202,166 in 2007) who take a tough, nationally conducted, admission test comparable to GMAT. Nearly all the students (91.6% in 2007-08) are engineers, largely from prestigious and highly sought after institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology and National Institutes of Technology. Being engineers and having scored very high in the national admission test, they believe that their quantitative and analytical skills are excellent. Therefore they do not like “poets,” to borrow a term from Robinson's (1994) *Snapshots from hell*, to point out gaps in their analysis or to question their logic. They reckon that there must be some inadequacy in the readers. The only corrections they readily accept are linguistic ones because English is a second language for all of them. Moreover, there are dictionaries and grammar books to consult if a student does not accept a linguistic correction the instructor suggests. But what reference books can they turn to when the instructor points out gaps in analysis or poor logic in their writing?

Feedback on written assignments has attracted unfavorable responses from students elsewhere as well. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (as cited in Docherty, Tse, Forman, & McKenzie, 2006) found students reporting that instructor feedback on their writing was of little use for future learning. Lea and Street (1998) and Carless (2006) note that feedback on writing reinforces the instructor's power and authority over students rather than help them improve their writing.

The unhappiness about instructor feedback appears to be deepened by the lack of palpable objectivity and uniformity in evaluation, which students, especially engineers, expect. There is no unanimity among either writing experts or among students about what constitutes good writing. See, for example, Lea and Street (1998), who found that some academics could not agree even on the meaning of such terms as 'structure', 'argument,' and 'clarity,' commonly used to describe good writing.

It is against the backdrop of IIMA students' persistent disappointment with instructor feedback on their analytical writing that the author explored peer feedback and evaluation. As a technique, peer evaluation of written assignments is not at all new among teachers of

writing. As Lynch (1985) and Lynch and Golen (1992) note, writing teachers have been using peer evaluation to cope with large classes, to add variety to teaching, and to expose students to other people's judgment. The present study wanted to see if peer feedback would make students more receptive to instructor feedback.

Objectives of the study

This study had two primary objectives: to see what kind of strengths and weaknesses students noticed in their peers' analytical writing and to gauge how readily students accepted feedback given by their peers. A secondary objective was to sensitize them to the difficulty in evaluating analytical writing objectively. The entire study was driven by the hope that students would perceive similarities between peer feedback and instructor feedback and accept the latter with greater willingness than at present.

Methodology

The study was conducted between January and March 2008 in the author's first year MBA class consisting of 73 students. This was the fourth cycle of this class's WAC assignments, the first three of which had been handled by another instructor in the first term. The fourth cycle was chosen because it was the first in the third term, and so the author would have access to the students till the end of the term. It was also expected that the students who had gone through three cycles of writing and instructor feedback would know how to evaluate analytical writing without elaborate directions.

The data were collected in three stages.

Stage 1. Each of 36 self-formed teams (35 pairs and one 3-member team) of students wrote a 1500-word research article on one of the five themes given to them. They had been asked to choose a topic within one of the themes, collect relevant data, analyze and interpret them, and present their analysis in the form of an article that could be published in a respectable Indian management journal such as IIMA's own *Vikalpa*. This assignment, which carried 30 per cent of the total course credit, generated 36 articles. The student-writers did not know then that their assignments might also be reviewed by peers apart from the instructor.

Stage 2. Twelve of these assignments, on three different themes, were identified at random. Each student was given two assignments (soft copies with all clues to the writers' identity removed) and asked to comment on them, grade them, and to briefly justify their grading. To reduce the influence of narrow pre-conceived frames in evaluation, students were assigned articles on themes different from the ones they had worked on. They were not given any specific guidelines on how to evaluate because they had already been exposed to instructor feedback and evaluation in three cycles of analytical report writing assignments in the first term. They were offered up to 3 per cent of the course credit if they inserted appropriate critical comments and justified their grading adequately. The deadline for submitting peer feedback was a week before the teams received their own assignments back with the instructor's feedback and grades. All the students except one attempted the peer-evaluation exercise and generated 144 peer-evaluated reports. See Exhibit 1 for a comparison of the allocation of grades by the students and by the instructor for the same assignment. This table was shared with the class when the instructor-graded assignments were returned as usual to the students.

A few days later the twelve pairs whose assignments were evaluated by fellow students received their articles with peer comments and grades. This time too, care was taken to mask the identities of the peer-evaluators.

Stage 3. All 73 students were asked to answer a questionnaire (Questionnaire A, see Appendix 1), which sought to capture what influenced their evaluation. Responses, received from 53 students (72.6%), are summarized in Exhibit 2. The 24 students (12 pairs) whose assignments had been peer-evaluated were also given an additional questionnaire (Questionnaire B, see Appendix 2), seeking their response to the comments and grades they had received from their peers. Eighteen students (75%) responded. Exhibit 3 provides a summary of their responses.

Findings and discussion

Many students and the researcher himself were initially concerned that overgenerous, hypercritical, incompetent, inconsistent, or non-serious evaluation by students might distort the process or render it counterproductive. But the broad objectives of the exercise appear to have been met.

1. Discovery of similarities between peer feedback and instructor feedback

Students inserted a wide variety of comments in the reports they evaluated. When those comments, excluding the ones on (English) language errors and inadequate or incorrect citations, were compiled and categorized (Table 1), it became apparent that they were comparable to the comments writing instructors generally gave students on their analytical writing.

Table 1
Gaps in analytical writing as identified in peer evaluation

Category	Comments	Percentage
Poor sequencing	99	27
Global statements without evidence	64	17
Lack of clarity	49	13
Poor logic	55	15
Irrelevant ideas	35	9
Data dumping instead of analysis	34	9
Lack of coherence	24	6
Poor reader-orientation	14	4
Total	374	100
<i>Sample size: 144 reports, evaluated by 72 students</i>		

These data were broadly confirmed by the answers the students gave to Questionnaire A (Exhibit 2), which sought to identify the features of peer reports that influenced their evaluation: the quality of logic in the argument presented, clarity of thought, depth and rigor of analysis (as opposed to dumping data), freshness in the ideas presented, smooth sequencing, and relevance of ideas to the theme.

The main deviation from instructor feedback was in reader orientation. As can be seen in Exhibit 2, a large number of students (39.2%) stated that reader orientation was not really an

important consideration in their evaluation of peer reports. This is reflected in the very small percentage of student comments (4%) on reader-orientation (Table 1). It is probable that their views on reader-orientation were affected by the fact that in the articles that they were reading and responding to, it did not matter much who the reader was. Their views might have been different in a decision report set in a specific organizational context.

2. Identification of gaps and weaknesses in one's own writing

In response to the open-ended question (“What insights, if any, did you gain into analytical writing from the experience of reviewing your classmates’ assignments and grading them?”) in Questionnaire A, there were several statements such as the following: “There are a lot of mistakes that I did not realize while making them but only when I could see them in someone else’s paper.” “I was able to detect breaks in the flow when reading the articles, but was unable to detect breaks in flow in my own text. Perhaps in future, I will take an outsider’s stand while evaluating/reading my own text.” The respondents had by and large realized that it was natural for writers to overlook gaps in their own writing. Students appear also to have realized that how a reader rates a report or article depends significantly on the presence or absence of such gaps.

3. Realization of the cause of reluctance to accept reader comments

Quite contrary to the researcher’s expectations, peer comments were not readily accepted by the student writers. As can be seen in Exhibit 3, there were as many rejections – some outright – as there were acceptances in almost all the categories. It is only regarding ‘data dumping’ and ‘making global statements without evidence’ that many of the writers readily accepted peer criticism. Perhaps it was easy to see for themselves that they had erred in these two categories, as in the objective categories of grammar and orthography.

The experience, however, was useful as can be inferred from some of the responses to the open-ended question (“What insights, if any, did you gain into analytical writing from the experience of reviewing your classmates’ assignments and receiving critical comments from your peers on your written assignments?”) in Questionnaire B: “Gained insight into what different people look into i.e. analysis, grammar, logic, etc.” “...when people review someone’s work, they go by critical analysis instead of appreciational analysis...” “The flow of the article as apparent to the reader may be different from what the author intended... Conclusions and inferences must be substantiated by facts to prevent them from sounding like ‘global statements.’”

The biggest resistance to peer criticism was in the following categories: poor logic, lack of clarity, and weak analysis. When they observed that many peer comments were similar to instructor comments, they realized that the problem was not the reader’s inadequacy but the writers’ inability to see any logical gaps in their own writing when there were no such gaps in their thinking.

4. Acceptance of the impracticality of objective grading of analytical writing

When students noticed the wide variation in the grades the same reports attracted from different anonymous peer evaluators (Exhibit 1), they realized the impracticality of demanding a completely objective grading of analytical writing. In the absence of a rigorous and detailed marking scheme given to the students, there was of course not enough evidence to arrive at any firm conclusions. Perhaps a detailed marking scheme would have reduced the gap while not guaranteeing elimination of subjectivity.

The researcher had anticipated a gap of two to three sub-grades between the highest and the lowest grades in each report. But the variation observed was much higher. Only three out of the twelve papers had the gap limited to three sub-grades. There were three papers with four sub-grades and four papers with five sub-grades separating the lowest from the highest. The two papers whose grades had a gap of six and seven sub-grades should probably be ignored; the out-lying grade might be due to purely individual evaluator characteristics such as being hyper-critical about others' ideas or over-generous with one's grades. In spite of such a possibility, the variation in grades was bewildering. It is not certain whether it is worth pursuing the goal of getting more-or-less the same grade from all evaluators or accepting such variations as a fact of life.

Conclusion

As the researcher approached this study in an exploratory mode within the framework of a required course, it had serious limitations. It is quite possible that some of the students evaluated peer-assignments merely as an academic exercise rather than as a genuine attempt at understanding them. Although the entire class participated in the mandatory exercise, some students might have treated it lightly as the credit for it (3 per cent of the total course credit) was not significant. They had little to lose by not taking the evaluation seriously.

Another problem was that the peer feedback exercise was based on 12 articles belonging to three different themes rather than decision reports based on a single case. Such reports would have made the measuring yardsticks uniform and more reliable. Absence of a set of detailed guidelines or marking scheme for students to follow when evaluating peer assignments also may have distorted the exercise. But the researcher's expectation was that absence of specific evaluation guidelines would lead to unconstrained and therefore spontaneous reading of the articles by the students.

In spite of such limitations, the study points to the conclusion that supplementing instructor feedback with peer feedback might help bright MBA students accept weaknesses in their analytical writing as a first step towards improving it. Some of the limitations of the present study can be overcome by using a case-based decision report instead of articles on different topics and by giving students a detailed marking scheme.

Exhibit 1

Peer grades compared with instructor grades for the same assignment

Article themes	Grade given by instructor	Grades given by peers										Total responses
		A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	
PPP1	C	-	-	-	1	-	3	-	3	-	1	8
PPP2	D+	-	-	1	1	2	2	2	-	-	-	8
PPP3	B+	-	-	3	1	2	1	1	-	-	-	8
PPP4	C	-	2	-	2	1	1	2	-	-	-	8
R&D1	C	-	1	3	3	2	3	2	1	-	-	15
R&D2	B+	-	2	3	5	2	2	-	-	1	-	15
R&D3	C	-	2	2	2	-	4	2	1	-	-	13
R&D4	C+	-	-	1	5	4	1	1	1	-	-	13
REntp1	C+	-	1	-	2	3	3	5	-	-	-	14
REntp2	B	1	2	3	2	2	3	1	-	-	-	14
REntp3	C+	1	-	-	-	6	3	2	1	1	-	14
REntp4	C-	-	-	1	3	2	5	3	-	-	-	14
Total		2	10	17	27	26	31	21	7	2	1	144
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PPP = Articles on Private-Public Partnerships • R&D = Articles on Research & Development • REntp = Rural Entrepreneurship 												

Exhibit 2

Summary of responses to Questionnaire A – From those who evaluated peer articles

Question: When you reviewed peer-written articles, how much did the following features (or their lack) influence your evaluation?

Category	A lot	Some -what	Not really	Not at all
Logic in the argument	37	14	2	-
Clarity of thought	33	19	-	-
Depth / rigor of analysis as opposed to data dumping in the text/exhibits	23	19	7	-
Freshness / insightfulness of ideas	12	32	7	2
Smooth flow of ideas	22	25	5	-
Relevance of ideas to the theme	27	21	5	-
Reader-orientation	7	24	19	1
Hygiene: Grammar, usage, spelling, mechanics	21	21	9	1
Appropriate citations & references	14	19	12	6
Any other (specify): 4 answers: relevance of data, feasibility of recommendations, contradictions, and logical argument				

Total Number of respondents: 53

Exhibit 3

Summary of responses to Questionnaire B – From those who had their assignments peer-evaluated

Question: When you received your assignment back from some of your peers, how did you respond to their comments on your report?

Category	Accepted readily	Accepted reluctantly	Rejected largely	Rejected totally	Not** applicable
Poor logic	2	5	5	2	4
Lack of clarity	2	5	4	2	5
Shallow/weak analysis	-	4	7	-	7
Data dumping in the text/exhibits	5	4	4	-	3
Global statements	6	2	7	1	2
No new insights	3	5	3	1	6
Jerky flow of ideas	2	4	4		6
Poor hygiene: poor grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation	5	3	6	2	2
References not given appropriately	2	3	4	2	7
Any other (specify)	3 total rejections: Reader failed to notice data given, comments on format, question on writer's integrity				
Any other (specify)	1 ready acceptance: Abrupt end				

Total Number of Respondents: 18

** These respondents did not find in their reports any reader comments that fell in the respective categories.

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Biography

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire A – For those who evaluated two peer articles, but did not have their own assignments reviewed by peers.

1. When you reviewed peer-written articles, how much did the following features (or their lack) influence your evaluation? Tick the appropriate column.

Sr. No.		A lot	Some-what	Not really	Not at all	Not applicable
1	Logic in the argument					
2	Clarity of thought					
3	Depth / rigor of analysis as opposed to data dumping in the text/exhibits					
4	Freshness / insightfulness of ideas					
5	Smooth flow of ideas					
6	Relevance of ideas to the theme					
7	Reader-orientation					
8	Hygiene: Grammar, usage, spelling, mechanics					
9	Appropriate citations & references					
10	Any other (specify)					
11	Any other (specify)					
12	Any other (specify)					

2. What insights (if any) did you gain into analytical writing from the experience of reviewing your classmates' assignments and grading them? Write concisely. Bullet points welcome!

Appendix 2

Questionnaire B – For those who evaluated two peer articles and also had their own assignment reviewed by peers.

1. [This question was the same as in Questionnaire A, given in Appendix 1.]
2. When you received your assignment back from some of your peers, how did you respond to their comments on your report? Tick the right cell.

Sr. No.		Accepted readily	Accepted reluctantly	Rejected largely	Rejected totally	Not applicable
1	Poor logic					
2	Lack of clarity					
3	Shallow/weak analysis					
4	Data dumping in the text/exhibits					
5	Global statements					
6	No new insights					
7	Jerky flow of ideas					
8	Poor hygiene: poor grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation					
9	References not given appropriately					
10	Any other (specify)					
11	Any other (specify)					

3. What insights (if any) have you gained into analytical writing from the experience of reviewing your classmates' assignments and receiving critical comments from your peers on your written assignments? Write concisely. Bullet points welcome!