

Using Student-Written Book Reviews as a Teaching Tool

Paul L. Ranelli

INTRODUCTION

Selecting an alternative to a classroom text is a useful way for students and faculty to view principles presented in a course. A well-chosen fictional or nonfictional account offers such an opportunity, as well as an opportunity for innovative instruction. When I was on the faculty at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, I assigned a book review as one requirement in an elective course for undergraduates called "Social Aspects of Pharmacy Practice." This course was offered each semester in 1988 and 1989. As an alternative or addition to a course text, this assignment allows students and faculty to integrate principles presented in the classroom.

For this assignment, students read a fictional or nonfictional book chosen for the course and write a two-page review that gives an overview of the book and critically evaluates it. Components of the review are an introduction, including citation material; a description of the book; several paragraphs examining specific points of interest to the student and instructor; an evaluation of the book's strengths and weaknesses; and a conclusion that not only reflects the review but also identifies the book's potential audience.

Paul L. Ranelli, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in the Department of Pharmacy Health Care Administration, University of Florida College of Pharmacy, Box J-496, JHMHC, Gainesville, FL 32610.

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JUSTIFICATION FOR THE ASSIGNMENT

Asking students to read a book and write a review helps the class in several ways (1, 2). It varies the context for presenting course material. Class texts often are not flexible enough to offer a more literary or human interest approach to a problem or issue. Integration of principles presented in the classroom with those outlined in a mass-market book is possible with this exercise. In addition, reading as an approach to lifelong learning is fostered by showing the relevance of popular books to pharmacy practice. In addition, critical thinking is fostered, and writing skills are used.

INTEGRATION IN THE COURSE

The book review is blended into "Social Aspects of Pharmacy Practice" to complement classroom lectures and topics. In the course, specific topics are discussed within the framework of two themes: (1) consumer compliance with medication regimens and (2) the social and behavioral aspects of drug prescribing and drug dispensing. The course is a 2-credit elective with a maximum enrollment of 20 students, and it is open to all professional-level pharmacy undergraduate students.

I have alternated between *Children's Hospital* and *The 36-Hour Day* for this assignment; only one of these is assigned each semester (3, 4). The emphasis of the course, Svarstad's health communication model, surfaces throughout the students' reviews of the books and in classroom discussion (5). For instance, one student integrated concepts of the health communication model with what she learned from *The 36-Hour Day*:

The impaired person has problems expressing his or her thoughts and in understanding what people say to them. This book provides key points for successful verbal and nonverbal communication. Verbal communication, for example, is improved by eliminating distractions, using short simple words and sentences, and by only asking one simple question at a time.

The novel *Children's Hospital* by Peggy Anderson focuses on the struggles of six pediatric patients and the roles caregivers play in tending to them. Caregivers include health care personnel and the patients' parents or guardians. Little mention is made of pharmacy. Book review and discussion points in the classroom include: communication networks among caregivers and patients; motivational factors for caregivers and patients; informational needs of caregivers and patients; and conditional factors, such as patient and caregiver life-styles, treatment style of providers, and situational influences. The following quotations were taken from book reviews of *Children's Hospital* by third-year and fifth-year pharmacy students:

Throughout, the reader realizes just how crucial the parents are to the well-being of the children.

The writing and reporting techniques used by the author make one feel like a parent who is sitting in the waiting room. . . .

Mark really respected his physician, but he was also able to vocalize his opinions and feelings without feeling stupid.

In fall 1989, author Peggy Anderson, who lives in the Philadelphia area, lectured to the class on her experiences while writing *Children's Hospital*. This added yet another dimension to the students' understanding of the characters. Unfortunately, *Children's Hospital* is now out of print. As a replacement, I plan to use the book *I want to grow hair, I want to grow up, I want to go to Boise* (6).

In *The 36-Hour Day*, Nancy Mace and Peter Rabins emphasize the social, psychological, physical, and environmental factors involved in caring for persons with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia in later life. The book is written specifically, but not exclusively, for family caregivers. The book reviews of *The 36-Hour Day* reflect course lectures and discussions on issues in elder health care, including polypharmacy, compliance, social and environmental barriers, and drug use, and on patients' and pharmacists' perceptions of chronic illness and mental illness. The following quotations were gleaned from book reviews of third-year and fourth-year pharmacy students:

[*The 36-Hour Day*] did not tell you that everything is going to be all right all the time; rather it told you that things can get worse – so be prepared.

The section on home care . . . told about what to expect from the daily activity of caring for your loved one and how it would affect things such as your marriage. I liked the fact that they came out and said that it may even affect your sex life with your spouse.

It is evident that Mace and Rabins feel that one of the most successful methods of coping is *KNOWLEDGE*. The authors were complete in content, covering seemingly every issue of dementia.

There is even a special section geared for a child or teenager to read to help understand why Grandma or Grandpa may be acting so strange.

BOOK REVIEW GUIDELINES

The general guidelines presented to the students emphasize the strengths of giving the reader a broad understanding and evaluation of the work rather than a chapter-by-chapter description. These guidelines are distributed in a one-page sheet entitled “Book Review Guidelines.” I also distribute a sample book review that incorporates the points in the suggested guidelines (7). Since the book review is relatively short, I recommend the use of transitional phrases instead of subheadings as a way to move smoothly from one point to the next. I suggest that students organize their reports around the following five points, which are based on work by Dawe and Dorman (8):

1. An introduction that presents the title, author’s name, type of work, general intent, and your attitude
2. An overview that acquaints readers with the whole work
3. Several paragraphs that examine specific aspects of the work
4. An evaluation that focuses on the work’s strengths and weaknesses

5. A conclusion that identifies the potential reader, renames the author and title, and reflects the opening and evaluation.

Specific guidelines and limits are: two double-spaced, typewritten pages; one-inch margins; use of a standard pitch and font; and no plastic report covers. Two copies of the review are submitted; one copy is graded and returned to the student. I discuss the assignment at the beginning of the course, including its relationship to course objectives. Students set their own pace for reading and reviewing the book. The review is due in the seventh week of a 15-week semester.

CLASS DISCUSSION AND GRADING

We discuss the book and reviews in class on the day the assignment is due. One hour of class time is devoted to discussion where students summarize their reviews and offer additional comments. I stimulate discussion by adapting the art-form method from the Institute of Cultural Affairs as described by Bain (9). The rationale for this method is the use of questions that proceed from the objective to the subjective to the interpretive (Table 1). The objective segment begins with nonevaluative questions that are answered easily. This helps set the precedent of responding and diminishes the kind of evaluative answers that can lead to unproductive comments such as, "I just didn't understand a thing about this book." Subjective questions, the next step, increase the class's common involvement with the book. These questions allow students to express positive, negative, and annoying points without leading to pointless counter-arguments such as, "You're crazy if you feel that way about it." Finally, the interpretive questions encourage the instructor and the students to get to the book's meaningful core.

The review is 15% of the student's grade. The students are not examined on material from the book. When grading the reviews, I look for creative nuggets sprinkled throughout, examples of critical thinking, avoidance of chapter descriptions, the book's impact on personal and professional self, statement(s) of what grabbed the

TABLE 1. Questions Based on the Art-Form Method Used to Stimulate Discussion

Objective

- What is some physical object or thing that comes to mind from the book?
- Would each of you in turn mention some action you recall from the book?
- What line of dialogue or phrase comes to mind from the book?

Subjective

- At what point did you get involved in the book?
- Were you surprised at the book?
- Was there any place where you were annoyed with the book?

Interpretive

- What do you sense the book's author is saying to us, to patients?
- What is the book saying about the meaning of health care?

student's attention, organization, and style points like spelling and syntax.

EVALUATION

Based on comments in class and on student evaluations, students give the assignment a high rating, especially the insight they gain into the social problems described in the books and where pharmacy may fit. Almost every review includes a statement regarding the value of the book to them as students and future pharmacists. Here are three examples:

I personally enjoyed [*The 36-Hour Day*] as I had lost my grandfather to Alzheimer's disease, and the book answered some of the questions for which I could never figure out any answers.

Mark's interest in the drugs he was being given showed that he respected his body and what was happening and being done to it. *Children's Hospital* should be required reading for any student embarking on a career as a health professional. The real-life accounts help prepare students for what will be expected of them in the years to come.

I really liked [*Children's Hospital*] and I can see where it fits into a course about psychosocial aspects because it provides a closer look at the sick role. It gives a health professional a better and more humanistic view of the patient.

In sum, book reviews offer a valuable educational opportunity by changing the context under which course material is presented.

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