

A Writing Narrative, A Learning Process

Preface

In the summer of 2001, Tobi Jacobi had the opportunity to interview teaching assistants throughout Syracuse University to learn more about how they used writing in their teaching. Her initial goal was to gather information that would help writing instructors better prepare students to do the various types of writing they encounter in the academic setting. The teaching assistants she interviewed described a variety of teaching-with-writing strategies used to enhance both general academic success and discipline or course-specific learning. They spoke eloquently about the power of writing as a pedagogical tool as well as the challenges of designing, managing, and assessing writing activities. Several of the teaching assistants Tobi interviewed expressed an interest in continuing the conversation about using writing in teaching. They wanted to share ideas, learn from other disciplinary perspectives, become more innovative and reflective in their teaching, assist new TAs and faculty, and above all, create effective learning opportunities for their students. This book is the beginning of that extended conversation.

With the support of the Professional Development Programs of the Graduate School, our group of experienced teaching assistants from a variety of disciplines formed the Using Writing to Teach Collaborative and gathered regularly throughout the spring and summer of 2002. From the beginning, we made a commitment to a process and product that were collaborative and interdisciplinary. This approach was very rewarding and often challenging. As we will discuss later, it inspired us to think more about ways that undergraduate students may experience our courses, how they navigate the expectations of disparate disciplines to chart an educational course that integrates knowledge, skill, and personal commitments—and how we use both formal and informal writing activities in our classrooms to make this learning visible. We also learned that, although the jargon of our disciplines might be different, we share many of the same concerns about creative, effective, and student/learning-centered teaching.

Representation from every department of the university would have been unwieldy and impossible. Our group did include TAs from the sciences, humanities, social sciences, and professional schools. We made additional efforts to solicit input and feedback from undergraduate students, teaching assistants, faculty, and alumni, and, in our discussions, we often challenged each other to look beyond our own disciplinary perspectives. This resulted in many exchanges around questions like: “What do *you* mean by *analysis*?” “What counts as text?” and “How could that exercise work in Engineering?”. We hope readers will add their own questions and ideas to the conversation through informal discussion with colleagues, professional development sessions in departments, and innovative practice in the classroom.

As we prepare this text for publication, we are overwhelmingly aware of how its collaborative nature has filtered through every stage of its development. We began with a lengthy discussion about how and why we use writing in our teaching. We selected topics to work on and each took the lead on writing specific chapters. Each chapter draft was shared and critiqued on a listserv and discussed in group meetings. We engaged each other and our students and colleagues in the development of the chapters in order to collect diverse teaching strategies, share resources, and test the application of ideas in different academic settings.

This book is not a “how-to” manual on how to write, how to teach, or how to teach writing. It does not encompass all types of writing or all academic arenas. It is, instead, a collection of ideas, questions, and teaching strategies that can connect writing to learning, enhancing both.

-The Collaborative Authors