

Learning to Use Writing to Teach

Chapter 1

I know students come into my class and have a hard time trying to figure out what a philosophy paper is about, as opposed to other kinds of papers. I know what a philosophy paper looks like, but I don't exactly know what other kinds of papers require. Therefore, I have a hard time trying to help them see through and negotiate disciplinary differences.

Students have the ability to express themselves through writing. Writing has such transformative potential for them in terms of being able to articulate themselves, articulate points, articulate positions and beliefs and ideologies and issues of power.

One of the things that I wrestle with is this tension . . . I know that I am comfortable with the written word. I like to read; I like good writing. I have learned from writing. I'm transformed by writing. I have a facility with it. But I also recognize that not everybody does. They have different learning styles; they have different preparations that enable them to be different things. I am really struggling with some of the assignments that I give. Am I asking them to write because that's the way to learn this, or is there a better way for them to learn?

One time I was a TA for a class and worked with one particular student—an international student—and she didn't write what we considered to be grammatically correct. Now, I work in sociology and women's studies, and I'm thinking, "Oh, here I am, the colonizer. You must write this way." I truly did not know how far to take correcting her grammar. It doesn't necessarily have to an international student. That's why I bring up these issues of language and power.

Sometimes the danger with really good writers is that they can be saying absolutely nothing. There was a student who had written a paper. Its argument was problematic and flawed but she did it so well. I was going to reward her just for writing well, and that was a problem.

As teachers and scholars representing multiple disciplines, we recognize the need for exemplary communication skills in the students we work with at Syracuse University. We design and facilitate courses intended to challenge the breadth of students' knowledge and demand that they engage critically with the world around them. Engaged students demonstrate their critical thinking skills through close reading, careful analysis, and writing. As the teacher quotations that open this chapter illustrate, the focus of this book is writing. We seek to articulate some of the ways that writing can function as both a demonstrable product and evolving process of developing such skills in our students. We encourage teachers to rethink their pedagogies and describe practical strategies and exercises for using writing in the classroom. This chapter articulates our ideas about the use of writing in teaching and names the pedagogical implications of applying the strategies and teaching ideas presented in *Using Writing to Teach* in any university course.

Using Writing to Teach: Some Assumptions

As our working group engaged in discussions about the purposes and practices of using writing to teach, we challenged each other to look beyond our own disciplinary perspectives. Eventually, we developed shared understandings about "writing" that shaped the direction of this project. In the context of using writing to teach and learn, we see writing as:

- Both Process and Product. We agreed that, in terms of making learning visible, the process of developing and expressing ideas through writing was as important as the end product. As with any pedagogical activity, there is a dynamic and dialectic relationship between process and product.
- Formal and Informal. We recognized that writing does not have to take the form of a formal assignment (term paper, essay question on exam, etc.) to be a valuable pedagogical tool. We made an effort to include strategies for using both formal exercises and informal writing activities throughout the book.
- Interactive. In our conversations, we returned again and again to issues of audience (writer/reader; teacher/student) and to the potential of writing as an instrument for giving and getting feedback. We also recognized that one reason students struggle with writing is that they have not always received constructive feedback that helps them think critically about what they know and how to improve their writing.
- More than Assessment (although useful for that, too). Most instructors use some form of writing to assess how well students have learned course material. As a group, we extend such a model to include the power of writing to generate learning, to encourage students to develop their own voices, and to help students connect what they are learning in our courses with other parts of their education and lives.

- Different Forms and Media. Writing assignments are no longer limited to essay questions in blue books or typed term papers (if they ever were!). Students may use writing to create video projects, PowerPoint presentations, and e-mail discussions about class materials. They also have more access to texts of different kinds through resources such as the Internet or electronic databases. The advent of new pedagogical and communications technologies presents many opportunities to be creative in our teaching, and it challenges us to rethink the structures and goals of learning activities.
- **Diverse and Evolving**. Although we are often immersed in standardized forms of academic/professional writing for our own disciplines, we recognize that there are many forms of academic writing. Students often struggle with navigating and integrating these disparate disciplinary expectations, and we can help them by making our expectations clear.

Implications of Using Writing to Teach

Our teaching will recognize the needs of multiple and diverse student learners. Incorporating writing into our teaching can present opportunities for a greater number of students to connect with course materials. As we recognize the emergence of research on alternative learning styles, we have a responsibility to move toward a model of more inclusive education by revising our teaching practices. Using writing in multiple and varied ways can begin to invite students to make meaning in ways that will enhance their understanding and challenge their creativity.

Our methods and classroom practices will be revised and enhanced. This book asks us to examine how writing might enhance how we convey information, design our classrooms, and use our class time. We believe that the time we spend teaching about writing and using writing in our teaching pays off in the quality of work we get from our students. Incorporating writing exercises and activities into the classroom can shift the tone significantly, becoming a method of quickening or relaxing student interaction with course material. A five-minute freewrite can function as a transition between readings or focus an upcoming class discussion. Brief exit notes written in the final moments of class can present a teacher with critical feedback about student understanding, engagement, and challenges. By enhancing our methods of teaching and inquiring, writing can make space for a deepened understanding of course ideas and materials through reflection, synthesis, and analysis.

Our students will be more involved. Writing can engage students both collaboratively and individually by asking them to process information through written media. It can function as a dialogic learning tool between students and their peers, course texts and assignments, and course instructors. Students can interpret and connect what they are learning when writing is incorporated into the classroom with deliberate pedagogical focus.

Teachers and students may experience an increased awareness of learning processes. Using writing to teach can make visible the processes students and teachers go through as they learn. For example, writing exercises that supplement math problems help students and instructors see students' understanding of concepts and problem-solving strategies. Writing can record the evolving process of understanding material through a sequence of short assignments; it can also deepen understanding by functioning as a space for reflection, analysis, and critique. Students can experience this achievement as they complete course work, and teachers will become aware of how their expectations are being met or should be revised as they respond to such texts. Through writing, understanding of material is challenged and deepened, and students are empowered as learners.

Our teaching will support multiple forms of knowing. Writing allows us to experiment with form in ways that can generate new thinking. Assignments that use writing to create dialogue, visual, aural, or web-based projects can move students toward critical thinking through alternative media. Teaching alternative methods of communication through writing exercises challenges our sense of how knowledge is constructed.

Our multi/interdisciplinary links will become more visible. As we use writing to teach, we outline expectations for both writing processes and products. Informal and sequential writing exercises can make the process of acculturating and moving between disciplinary conventions a part of course conversation. The connections between courses and scholarly traditions can become a teaching tool through writing as students grapple with rhetorical strategies, discipline-specific genres, and resource citation rules.

Our teaching and learning will emphasize the evolving nature of literacy. The advanced literacy skills cultivated in university classrooms are ever-changing and blurring. Using writing as a learning tool across university courses prepares our students for the wide variety of communication tasks that lay before them in the workplace.

How Writing Enters Teaching

See Reader's Guide for more information on using this book.

As the quotes that begin each chapter illustrate, there are great advantages and significant challenges to using writing in teaching. Using writing as a teaching tool presents pedagogical questions and opportunities throughout a course or assignment. This book addresses issues for instructors related to course and assignment design, development, and response.

Design:

Chapter 2 discusses the design of course materials and assignments, using writing to promote student involvement and understanding of course objectives and requirements. Chapter 3 presents strategies for fostering critical thinking skills through writing activities for close reading and analysis.

Development: Chapter 4 acknowledges the varied processes writers use and presents strategies for developing academic writing practices. Chapter 5 articulates the relationship between content and form and illustrates the importance of audience awareness in writing and research.

Response:

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the responsibility of responding to and evaluating student writing through discussions of feedback strategies, teacher expectations, and difference. Chapter 8 addresses academic honesty through a discussion of preventative and responsive methods.

"If the secret to writing is "write, write, write," then the secret to using writing in our classrooms is asking students to "write, write, write." —John Draeger