WID Conversations:
Exploring Student Writing in the Disciplines

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What is Writing to Learn?

Writing to learn is a method of teaching that uses writing as a tool for learning, or as James Moffett would say, "writing to *know* as well as to *show*" (McLeod 2010). According to Susan McLeod, in order for writing to learn to be effective as a tool for learning, it should be ungraded. While the teacher does respond, it is as a facilitator of learning, commenting on ideas, rather than as a judge, testing student acquisition of content material. With writing to learn, students are encouraged to think on paper to discover what they know and what they still need to learn.

Some might argue that emphasizing writing in their courses will take time away from learning content. This is a legitimate concern; however, as Robert Zemsky, founding director of the University of Pennsylvania's Institute for Research on Higher Education, would argue, prioritizing content while simultaneously teaching the critical thinking skills necessary to acquire and apply new knowledge can increase the amount of subject matter that students actually learn (in Bean, 2011).

James Britton (in McLeod, 2010), argues that language is essential to learning because it is through language that we organize our understanding of the world. Britton calls for the introduction of more "expressive" writing in all courses, which facilitates the exploration and assimilation of new ideas, the creation of links between the unfamiliar and the familiar by allowing students to explain things to themselves before explaining them to others. One of the key ways to achieve this goal is the use of journal writing.

Dialogic Journal/Double Entry Journal

Dialogic journals encourage students to interact with the material they are learning, to learn about or question others or themselves, or to see things from different angles that are either new to them or go against their beliefs.

1. Ask students to fold a page in their notebook in half (long ways).
2. Students should write the title of the text or lecture at the top of the page.
3. In the first column, they write down anything that catches their attention, seems significant or confuses them (while noting the page number, if taken from a written text).

4. In the second column, students explain what made them write that note in the first column and/or respond to, question, critique, draw connections to, or expand upon it.

Students will likely ping-pong between the two columns, writing down their observations and responding to them. You can even specify the number of entries that you'd like the students to include.

This activity helps students be more engaged with in-class note-taking, help them think critically about lectures or texts, and even have them consider whether a text is useful for a research project.

Critical Reading Activities. https://wr.english.fsu.edu/College-Composition/The-Inkwell/Critical-Reading-Activities

Mock Tests

This activity asks students to review and really think about the material before a test by having them make up a test over the material. This exercise can be done in class or as homework, either individually or in groups. Then students should hear and discuss each other's test questions. The power of this exercise rests in getting them to identify what they believe to be the key concepts and relationships in a body of material. If they miss the mark, they will find out in class before the test.

Before giving your students this assignment, you may want to teach them some questioning techniques, such as Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive operations. You may also find it helpful to specify the test format – the number of multiple-choice items, true-false, short-answer questions, essay questions, etc. With a little practice, your students may write such good questions that you can actually use some of them in your tests.

Nilson (2003) Teaching at Its Best

Quickwrites

Quickwrites give students a chance to pause and think about a topic covered in class, in a reading, in preparation for an upcoming project, etc. These can be used to help start discussions in the class (you know they have something to say because

they've written it down), to help you get a clear sense of what students do or do not understand so that you can move on or review the content, or to help students think through their plans for upcoming tasks/projects. Depending on how you use these, you might collect them and read all, just a few, or you might not collect them.

Bean (2011), *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*, p. 132

a. At the Beginning of Class to Probe a Subject

Give students a question that reviews previous material or stimulates interest in the next lecture. Questions can be exploratory: "What questions do you want to ask about last night's readings?" or precise: "What does it mean when we say that a certain market is 'efficient'?" or designed to get students thinking before class discussion: "How does Plato's allegory of the cave make you look at knowledge in a new way?"

In addition, you could write three key words on the board from the last class or reading and ask students to explain their importance. Or you could write a major hypothesis, conclusion, or provocative statement related to class or readings and ask students to write their reactions.

b. During Class to Ask Questions or Express Confusion

Give students several minutes at the end of class to sum up the day's lecture or discussion and to prepare questions to ask at the start of the next class. Suggested questions: "What is the most significant thing covered up to this point?" and "What question is uppermost in your mind before we move on?" or "What is the muddiest point in the material I have just covered?"

c. At the End of Class to Sum Up a Lecture or Discussion

When lecturing on tough material, stop midway during your lecture and ask students to respond to a writing prompt like this: "If you have understood my lecture so far, summarize my main points in your own words. If you are currently confused about something, explain what is puzzling you; ask me the questions you need answered."

This activity gives students a chance to stop and think through the material, as well as refocus (if they are getting distracted). It also gives you the opportunity to see if many students are confused in similar ways. You can stop and address that topic more fully before moving on to more difficult concepts. Or you can ask students to get into groups and share their comments to help explain main ideas to each other.

Interrogating Propositions

These activities ask students to argue a particular point of view based on content from class discussions and/or readings. The goal is to get students to think critically about course material while also considering how to make a strong argument and offer evidence that is relevant and valued by the discipline. Below are examples from several disciplines.

"The price-earnings ratio of a stock (does/does not) reflect the rate or return that an investor will achieve." (Finance)

"Sustained exposure to violent videogames (does/does not) lead to more violent behavior in children." (Psychology)

"Lower class size is/is not directly related to educational achievement." (Education)

"Language development (is/is not) a function of direct instruction by parents." (Linguistics)

from Chris Anson's Keynote from the Seventh International Conference on Effective Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: "Writing as a High-Impact Practice: Toward an Ecological Model of Writing and Learning" held at AUB on February 10, 2017.

Freewriting: A Free Way to Write!

Sometimes students produce technically correct but dead writing due to premature editing. To remedy this problem, in "Freewriting," Peter Elbow (1998) states that "editing, *in itself*, is not the problem." Editing is usually necessary to produce good

writing. The problem with editing according to Elbow is that it is usually taking place along with the writing, as if the editor is constantly looking over the shoulder of the writer. In effect what this does is it censors "unacceptable thoughts and feelings," as we do in speaking and does not allow for the free flow of ideas.

Practiced regularly, free-writing undoes the ingrained habit of simultaneously editing as one is writing. Thoughts will manifest themselves more easily because some of the restraints of writing have been removed, allowing the writer the luxury to put down whatever is on his/her mind and to consider the repercussions later. So what is freewriting? It is a process of writing where the writer writes continuously for a certain amount of time (for example, 10 minutes) without stopping to look back, to cross out anything, to consider which word is appropriate, to wonder how to spell something, etc. The only requirement is not to stop writing for the set time. Further, it is writing that is not graded. Indeed, the teacher should not even provide comments on the freewriting text.

Reflective writing

Reflection has several advantages for the teacher. It is a powerful tool that in of itself teaches, rather than merely reflects. It can also enable the teacher to know at any given moment how much of a course is actually being learned or is not being learned and in sufficient time to make any necessary alterations in planning, rather than waiting to a midterm or final exam. Finally, it puts the effort of education where it really belongs, on the students in their efforts at learning, while relieving teachers of much needless labor and wasted paper producing minimum results.

> **Open-ended journals** are the classic form in which students write set numbers of words per day upon any topics desired with the proviso that they will receive no feedback from teachers: no comments on their thoughts, no corrections of grammar and, above all, no grades for English usage. The literature has demonstrated that regular extensive writing is a key to better intensive writing. This is particularly pertinent in modern universities with students who actively dislike reading and writing.

Daily class-specific reflections, on the other hand, enable teachers to measure student acquisition of particular lessons or readings and enable them to alter lesson plans and syllabi to meet needs as they occur. As such, daily reflections are more accurate indicators of class reality than occasional tests and essays. As with open-ended journals, grades reflect percentages of expected amount of words and days of writing.

End-of-term course reflections are useful in evaluating the course if the instructions are precise. To avoid useless flattery of teachers and self-congratulation by students, the assignment should not be "What you have learned?" but rather, "How can the course be improved to better meet the needs of students yet to come?" Topics of writing are not the students but the courses; to facilitate this, it is useful to require the student to refrain from the use of first and second person pronouns.

Advantages for students are that the very act of writing is a powerful learning tool. Not worried about judgment on the quality of their English, they are more able to concentrate on the subject of instruction, rather than the medium of communication.

Advantages for teachers are that they receive prompt and more accurate measures of student engagement with and acquisition of subjects of study. Teachers are expected to spend **less hours and less work on extraneous matters**, freeing them to concentrate on the subjects of their interest.

Grading is, of course, as teachers wish. For daily journals, grading that represents solely a percentage of possible entries has proved to be a real incentive for extensive student writing. Grades for end-of-term course reflections can be based on useful suggestions submitted or merely as a credit for submission.

Sample Learning Log Topics

A learning log could be applied to any course where students must acquire particular content. Students keep a lot to record what they are learning in the course. In this particular example from physics, the students keep a regular log that helps them to reflect on the content of the course as a way to ensure that they understand it (and can perhaps apply it), and as a tool for them to use when studying for exams.

9/21 Explain Newton's third law, including examples from the real world.

9/24 Explain what friction is, including why it is sometimes helpful and sometimes a nuisance.

9/26 Describe the concept of momentum to your younger sibling.

9/28 Explain why (in the event of a collision) the passenger in a smaller car is more likely to be injured in the interaction with a large car.

10/3 Explain to a third-grade class why water stays in a pail when swung in a vertical circle around her head.

Jensen, Verner. "Writing in College Physics" *The Journal Book*, edited by T. Fulwiler. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook.

Low-Stakes Dialogue

Dialogues can be used when students are learning about two separate entities and need to consider either broad or nuanced similarities and differences between them and/or their relationship. Perhaps a dialogue between Aristotle and Plato to distinguish their views about the soul or between a socialist and a communist to discuss their views on Brexit.

Ex: Imagine that you were present at a meeting where Cortez and Moctezuma sat down to discuss what each thought of the other's civilization. What do you think they would have said? Write a dialogue between the two men, discussing what they admired and disliked about each other's culture. Keep in mind what each might have considered "civilized" and "uncivilized" about each other.

Jordi Getman-Erasom, BCC, http://www.bcc.cuny.edu/WAC/?page=Resources

Annotating texts

Annotations are a form of writing, where students read an article or text and make notes in the margin about what they think or where they are confused. Their thoughts can then be shared with the class as an easy way to check that students have done the assigned reading and are moving toward strong critical analysis.

Low-Stakes Twitter Summaries

Students summarize the content of challenging peer-reviewed journal articles in the form of a Tweet. These can then be shared in groups in class to have students compare their Tweets and understanding the essence of the articles.

Anson (2017)

Previewing final-examination essay questions

Adapt essay questions from one of your exams that require both subject matter knowledge and critical thinking. Provide the question(s) as an in-class ungraded writing prompt.

This activity is especially useful if you have timed essay exams in which students struggle to complete the work in the allotted time frame. This activity lets students consider possibilities for the exam ahead of time, and of course, you can always modify the question so that it has students begin thinking about the issue without knowing the full exam question.

Bean (2011) p. 6.

Unsent Letters

Students can compose unsent letters to address trends / policies, to someone who being studied and / or to someone more generally involved in the material being discussed. For example, students might write letters to creators of a hospital T.V. series to suggest ways a nurse character could be more accurately represented.

Poirrier (1997) *Writing-to-Learn*

Informal Lab Reports/Instructions

For some labs, the experience or the procedure is more important than any planned outcome. For instance, students can complete the steps and answer questions as they go, but at the end write an informal lab report that is more like a reflection, one that simply asks "What did I learn?"

If you have an inquiry lab that does not have a written lab guide, ask the students to perform the task and then write a short instruction guide as if it was being written to a friend that tells them how to do it.

From *The Biology Corner*, "Writing to Learn"

Previewing the chapter/unit

Before class, ask the students to peruse the information, the section headings, the highlighted information boxes of text, and any end-of-chapter questions. Then ask them to write about (a) what they think the chapter is going to be about, (b) what information they want to learn by the end of the chapter, (c) how the material integrates with previously learned material, or (d) possible uses of this material. This allows for the lecture to be shaped around some of their interesting questions and considerations about the topics. It also allows the instructor to monitor students' preconceptions about upcoming subjects or units.

Lance & Lance (2006) "Writing-to-Learn Assignments in Content-Driven Courses"
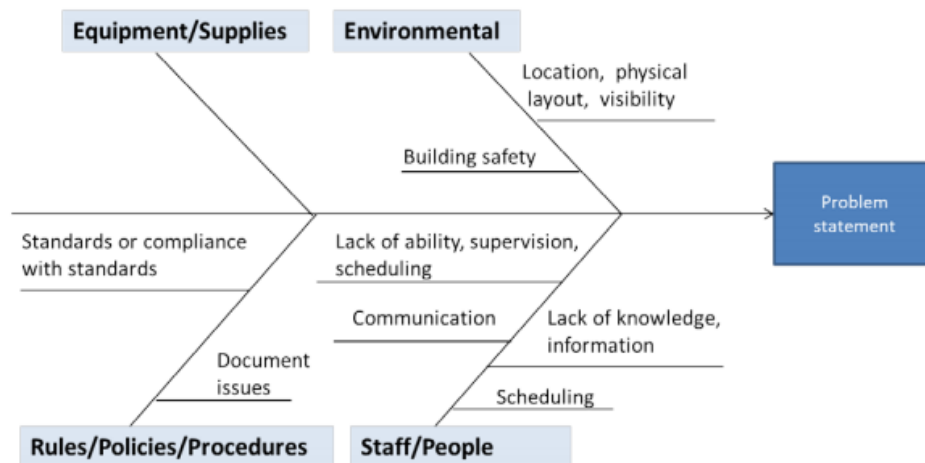
Fishbone Map

This activity, also called a herringbone map, is a graphic organizer that helps students explore and organize their thoughts on a complex topic in a simple, visual way.

Students write a clear, specific problem statement (also referred to as the effect) at the mouth of the "fish."

If students are given this problem: "A resident fell and was injured during a transfer from her wheelchair to the toilet, while being assisted by an aide," they use the fishbone map to:

Fishbone Map
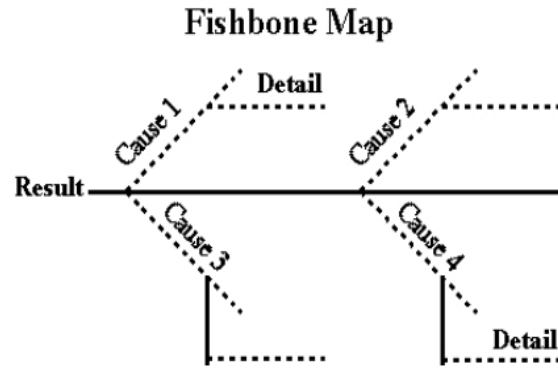
- Find and brainstorm all the major categories of causes of the problem (written as branches from the main arrow) by asking "Why does this happen?"

- Students then are prompted to asks "Why does this happen?" about each cause. They write the sub-causes branching off the cause branches.

- Students are urged to ask "Why?" again to generate deeper levels of causes and continue organizing them under related causes or categories.

Students consider the different causes and factors leading to a given problem. This in turn helps them suggest adequate solutions or prevention methods.

"How to Use the Fishbone Tool for Root Cause Analysis."
https://www.cms.gov/medicare/provider-enrollment-and-certification/qapi/

Peer Review

Peer review is not only a timesaving strategy for teachers but also a process that helps both the student reviewer and the student writer produce more sophisticated texts because the process leads to genuine revision. Research suggests that peer-review guidelines that call for descriptions of (and reactions to) specific features of a draft are more effective than prompts calling for evaluation, opinions, or judgments (Nilson in Bean, 2011) because description and reaction cause more time on task from the peer reviewers and produce more useful information for the writer.

Judgment Questions:	Description Questions:
Does the paper have a thesis statement? Is the thesis clear?	In just one or two sentences, state what position you think the writer is taking. Place stars around the sentence that you think presents the thesis.
Is the paper clearly organized?	On the back of this sheet, make an outline of the paper.
Does the writer use evidence effectively to support the argument?	List the kinds of evidence used to support the writer's argument. Which pieces of evidence do you think are the strongest? Which are the weakest?
Is the paper clearly written throughout?	Highlight (in color) any passages that you had to read more than once to understand what the writer was saying.
How persuasive is the argument?	After reading the paper, do you agree or disagree with the writer's position? Why or why not?

reproduced from Bean (2011)