2007

Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Student Writing (but Were Afraid to Ask)

Michael Reder
Connecticut College

Reder, Michael, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Student Writing (but Were Afraid to Ask)" (2007). *Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives*. 102.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives/102

Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Student Writing (but Were Afraid to Ask)

Michael Reder, *Connecticut College*

Although faculty often think of writing as a way in which students can communicate what they have learned, we sometimes forget that writing in itself is a powerful mode of learning. Emig (1977) believes that "Writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (122). These correspondences shared by both writing and learning include self-provided feedback (both immediate and long-term), the ability to make connections ("conceptual groupings, synthetic, analytic"), and, perhaps most importantly, an "active, engaged, personal" and "self-rhythmed" style (128). Having students write as a way to learn can be an efficient way not only to engage students with the content of the material they are learning but also foster the development of the thinking abilities we want in our students: to read and analyze texts; to formulate and solve problems; to follow or make a coherent argument; to adopt different perspectives; and to form and test hypotheses.

Thus, writing itself is a powerful tool for teaching, because *writing is thinking (and learning) made visible*. The connection between writing and thinking means that students can and should write about

what they need to learn as they learn it. Writing can be employed in ways that allow a teacher to see not only what a student knows, but also how her thinking is developing and where she is going right or wrong (Elbow, 1997; Kalman & Kalman, 1997-98; Young, 1999). Because well-designed writing assignments can offer us insight into student learning, they also can help us adjust our teaching to meet the needs of our students better. Courses across the curriculum should employ writing to help faculty and students alike to assess student mastery of the material, ideas, concepts, or skills.

Most of us lack a familiarity with the now large body of research on writing that can help us inform our practice . Below I offer three of the most helpful strategies and practices for using writing effectively in our classrooms. Although within the purview of this article I can only offer the most basic introduction to these concepts, the resources that I reference provide clear and simple guidance for faculty who want to learn more.

1.) The Difference Between Low-stakes and High-stakes Assignments

Elbow (1997) uses the term "low stakes" and "high stakes" to describe "how much a piece of writing *matters* or *counts*" (5). Examples of low-stakes assignments include personal reading journals, class emails, discussion boards, "2-minute essays," notes, directed writings, and drafts (see Young, 1999). Elbow lists numerous advantages of low-stakes writing: it allows the students to "involve themselves more in the ideas or subject matter of the course"; low-stakes "prose is usually livelier, clearer, and more natural" than high-stakes writing where students worry about a grade and are trying to write exactly "what the teacher was looking for"; and low-stakes assignments improve the quality of students' more formal, high-stakes writing by "warming them up" and giving the opportunity to process and hone their ideas. Additionally, frequent use of low-stakes assignments ensures that students keep up with the course readings and materials (Elbow, 1997; 7-8). Although such assignments can still contribute to a student's overall grade, they may or may not receive feedback, and if the work does receive a grade, it might be a satisfactory or unsatisfactory, a check, check-minus, or check-plus, or a completed or not-completed. Bean (1996), Young (1999), and Elbow & Sorcinelli (2006) all offer

faculty excellent ideas for using low-stakes writing to improve student learning across the disciplines.

2.) How to Design and "Scaffold" Larger Writing Assignments

"High-stakes" assignments such as final papers, should be completed in stages, helping ensure not only that the final product will be better, but also that students learn—and can make corrections—during the writing process. Breaking the writing process down into more manageable parts and discrete steps, sometimes called "scaffolding," allows a student to receive formative feedback (from faculty, peers, or a Writing Center) as she progresses through a large assignment. It also requires a student to think about writing not only in terms of getting ideas down on paper, but as *revision* and *rewriting*. A simple example of scaffolding an assignment is a final research paper that is written in stages: first a thesis and a bibliography might be turned in for comments; then a rough draft that might be commented upon by the professor, taken to a writing center, or peer edited; and, only then, after those stages, would a final draft be turned in. Young (1999) does a nice job of discussing the different stages of writing (45-55), and Bean (1996) offers excellent suggestions for encouraging student revision (33-34; 197-214; 217-238).

3.) There are Specific Strategies for Giving Effective Comments on Student Writing

There are two main types of comments on writing: *macro* (also called global), which are comments related to the overall thesis, argument, and structure of a paper, and *micro* (also called local), which focus on grammar, mechanics, spelling, punctuation, and style—more sentence-level, editing issues. Before making comments, we need to have in mind what the *purposes* of our comments are: Are they geared towards justifying a grade given on a final version of a paper? Are the comments geared toward revision of a draft? Are the comments merely meant to respond to what a student has to say, rather than how he is saying it?

Sommers (1982) believes that many faculty offer comments merely to justify a grade, and offer students generic comments (such as "vague") that inform students what they have done wrong but offer

them little specific guidance about how to correct the problem. We need to give students a sense of what it is like to read their writing, and one of the best ways to do this is to ask questions (e.g., "What do you mean, exactly, by _____?"). Sommers also notes that faculty often make too many comments, and end up sending our students conflicting messages about what they need to do to improve a piece of writing: we may write both "needs more info" about a sentence and then, out in the margins, refer to the entire paragraph as "wordy"; or within one paragraph we might offer conflicting micro and macro feedback (e.g., "Wrong tense;" i.e., *Fix this small error*, and "The topic of this paragraph is irrelevant to your thesis;" i.e., *The entire paragraph needs to be removed or the contents changed*). She argues that students become confused during revision, and end up making the simpler editing (micro) changes rather than truly rewriting their paper and improving their thinking. Lunsford (1997) offers seven clear and simple principles for responding to student writing, such as offering "well-developed and text-specific comments"; focusing on global, not local concerns; adapting comments to "the student writer behind the text" and "the rhetorical situation for the writing"; and designing comments "to help students approach writing as a process" (91).

Furthering Your Own Education
I have introduced these important ideas and strategies, but to employ them effectively in your classrooms and laboratories you will need to learn more and adapt these large concepts to your own teaching style and discipline. The works that I refer to below are the ones I regularly provide for faculty during the workshops I run. Finally, I urge each of you to become familiar with the types of support that are available both for students who are writing *and* for faculty who are interested in using writing as part of their teaching: writing centers and faculty workshops are particularly helpful and often under-utilized.

I believe it is essential for all faculty to understand not only the ways in which writing can be used most effectively to foster student learning, but also that writing is the responsibility of all teaching faculty, no matter what our discipline or the level of students whom we teach. As faculty, we owe it to ourselves and to our students to become more effective teachers of writing.

References

Bean, J. (1996). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Elbow, P. (1997). High Stakes and low stakes in assigning and responding to writing. In M. D. Sorcinelli & P. Elbow (Eds.), *New directions for teaching and learning: Vol 69. Writing to learn: Strategies for assigning and responding to writing across the disciplines* (pp. 5-13). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Elbow, P., & Sorcinelli, M.D. (2006). How to enhance learning by using high-stakes and low-stakes writing. In W. J. McKeachie & M. Svinicki (Eds.) *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers. 12*[th] *ed.* (192-212). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Emig, J. (1977). Writing as a mode of learning. *CCC: College Composition and Communication, 28(2),* 122-128.

Kalman, J., & Kalman, C. (1997-98). Writing to learn. *Essays on teaching excellence: Vol 9(4).*

Lunsford, R. F. (1997). When less is more: Principles for responding in the disciplines. In M. D. Sorcinelli & P. Elbow (Eds.), *New directions for teaching and learning: Vol 69. Writing to learn: Strategies for assigning and responding to writing across the disciplines* (pp. 91-104). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Sommers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing. *CCC: College Composition and Communication, 34(2),* 122-132.

Young, A. (1999). *Teaching writing across the curriculum. 3*[rd] *ed.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Michael Reder (Ph.D., University of Massachusetts, Amherst) directs the Center for Teaching & Learning at Connecticut College.