

Why Should YOU Teach Writing?

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You shouldn't. You can't. But you can use writing to help your students learn the content of your course and then use what they've learned. Why can I say that so confidently? Because as a learning specialist, I believe that writing is intimately connected with two fundamental processes we are trying to teach - thinking and communicating - and, as with all learning, the more you do it, the more skillful you become.

Writing as thinking

"Real learning," the kind that endures, requires thinking, or, as we say in the jargon, deep processing. That means taking the information in, tearing it apart, looking for the underlying structure, the relationships between parts, and constructing a personal understanding of the information which coincides with our personal "world view." Oh, the students can listen to you describe your world view or the textbook's view, but that's not what you mean by "really learning something." It's not until the students give you their world view, one that they've worked out and can support and defend and explain, that you will agree they understand the material.

Writing is a way of giving the students an opportunity to develop that kind of understanding of the content because writing about something requires thinking about it. Even if all they're doing is writing down their version of your last lecture, at least they have to engage in some editing along the way, picking out the main points, getting the right evidence with the right argument and so on. The very act of writing it out forces the student to process the information, and information processing is a fundamental act of learning. Of course, the student won't get it all correct the first time he or she tries to write, but, as with all learning, the more practice and the more feedback they get, the better they'll be in the future. There's even some evidence to indicate that if students only think they'll have to write about something, they go about learning the material differently, more in line with overviews and underlying structure than details.

From the above discussion, it seems fairly obvious that requiring students to write about the content of your course is a way of getting them to think about the content in a way that is different from their normal, passive learning mode of note-taking and textbook underlining. The kind of active thinking involved in the process of writing more accurately reflects the kind of active thinking which is the everyday activity of the content specialist. It requires the

understanding of concepts, the analysis of information, the evaluation of evidence, the construction and testing of hypotheses. These are the higher-level intellectual skills we are trying to develop in our students. To learn them, however, the students must practice them, and one term paper per course in one course per college career does not constitute practice. Neither does sitting in a seminar, listening to the professor or the other students doing the analysis. If you want students to learn to think about the content of your course at more than a superficial level, then give them the opportunity to write about the content of your course and thinking will be hard to avoid. Not impossible, of course, but hard.

Writing as communicating

Another activity we associate with "real understanding" of content is the ability to communicate that content, not just one way, but a variety of ways in a variety of circumstances. Can you say that you really speak Italian if you only know one way to "Which way to the American Express office?" To be really fluent in any language, including the specialized language of a discipline, you need to be able to communicate your meaning in a variety of ways to a variety of audiences. Such fluency of communication only comes through practice, and one of the most effective and readily available means of practice is writing. The more a student writes, the easier it becomes to put thoughts into words and to see the effect of those words on the thoughts and actions of others.

An even stronger argument in favor of practice in writing as communication is the fact that the most brilliant thinking in the world won't do us much good until the thinker can communicate those thoughts to the rest of us. Reflect a moment on how much power an effective communicator has to influence others, not just "the masses" but the practitioners in his or her field. If you are going to the trouble of producing brilliant thinkers in your field, give them the communication tools to put that brilliant thinking to work affecting others.

The need to communicate effectively is not limited to brilliant thinkers. If you consider any professional, yourself included, you will discover that the majority of his or her time is spent trying to communicate with others, especially in writing. It is often on the basis of those written communications that people form lasting impressions of us, including their impressions of whether what we have to say is

worth listening to. Thus it becomes doubly important that the students learn to communicate through writing.

Yes, but why should I do it?

You should do it because you are the most intelligent consumer of thinking and communicating in your discipline. You have the best grasp of what it means to think and communicate like a psychologist, physicist, architect, engineer. Our colleagues in English can give the students the basics of the writing process, but the fine tuning and the motivation to learn needs to come from the specialists in the discipline. There isn't anyone better equipped to help them with that learning than you.
