



Teaching at USMA

Vol. 10 No. 3

Center for Teaching Excellence
<http://www-internal.dean.usma.edu/centers/cte>

October 2004

What's All the Writing About? By Anita Gandolfo

There's an axiom in education that "teachers tend to teach the way they were taught," and that's perhaps most true when it comes to writing assignments. If we "did a paper," when we were students in a course we now find ourselves teaching, then it's obvious that we need to have our students "do a paper" as well. What's often overlooked is that way back when that writing assignment was first developed, there was a probably goal for learning involved that most often has vanished from the consciousness of teachers who are currently assigning that "paper."

The first principle of assigning writing to students is that **the task must be connected to specific pedagogical goals**—i.e., *why* do I want them to write? For example, the traditional "research paper" in a course is usually designed as a capstone experience to help students synthesize course content. It's a way to deepen the learning experience for the student. But such an assignment presupposes that the student will become fully engaged in the task. If it is done in a superficial way is a "slug stopper," then the cognitive experience that was the aim of the assignment has not been achieved. In such instances, the instructor should re-think whether that "traditional" writing assignment is still appropriate.

For example, many years ago, I was teaching English literature to graduate students. Graduate literature classes traditionally involve a "big" paper of extensive literary analysis that's submitted at the end of the course, often the last day of class. I became aware of the fact that my students' papers were generally poor; they were not coming to graduate school with the skills we expected. However, a paper submitted on the final class day doesn't allow for any learning from that writing experience. So the following semester, I organized my class with four much shorter papers of literary analysis so that the assignments would enable the students to develop their ability to write a literary paper. Most of my colleagues continued with the "big" paper at the end of the course—and also continued to bemoan their students' inability to write such papers well. Re-thinking "traditional assignments" is often one of the most difficult things for teachers to do.

Whether you want to review current assignments in your course or plan new ones, a great place to begin is Kiefer, K. (2000). *Integrating Writing Into Any Course: Starting Points*, available at

<http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/teaching/kiefer2000.htm>

Kiefer distinguishes between traditional "term paper" assignments and activities known as "writing to learn." After teachers articulate their goals for incorporating writing into courses, working backwards from the goals to specific assignments can be relatively straightforward. This article provides a process for teachers to determine goals and then devise writing assignments to fit those goals.

In addition, I'd suggest that anyone interested in writing in the disciplines take a look at a key text that's online: Fulwiler, T., Art Young, eds. (1982). *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

http://wac.colostate.edu/books/language_connections/

Available online as part of the Academic Writing series, Landmark Publications in Writing Studies, *Language Connections* focuses on general language skills teachers in all disciplines can use "to enhance student learning and, at the same time, reinforce the more specific language skills taught by reading, writing and speech teachers" (ix). The 12 chapters address issues including journal writing, problem solving approaches to writing, transactional writing, writing to learn, reading processes, and conferencing.

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Reflection Exercise*

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What's All the Writing About?

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For those in the sciences, there's an excellent book online in Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, available online at http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bazerman_shaping/

In *Shaping Written Knowledge*, Charles Bazerman traces the history and character of the experimental article in science, calling attention to the social and rhetorical forces that shaped its development. The book provides a broadly interdisciplinary exploration of an important genre and offers insights that extend far beyond its immediate focus of study.

For those who might be interested in using brief writing activities to develop student learning, another helpful book, available on line is Young, A. (1997/1999). *Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum, Third Edition*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

http://wac.colostate.edu/books/young_teaching/

This text provides a comprehensive, accessible discussion of teaching writing across the curriculum. Written by one of the leaders in the field, it offers a brief introduction to WAC and then discusses how writing can be used to help students learn and communicate. Young provides good examples of a variety of writing activities that can complement any course and develop student learning in that discipline.

The Purpose of Student Writing

Research in cognition has highlighted the importance of students' participation in the construction of their own knowledge and the valuable contribution of writing to that process

The depth of long-term learning may depend on the extent to which learners try to analyze, clarify, or articulate their experiences to others in their family, work, or social groups. The depth of learning increases when new concepts and skills are useful in meeting current needs or problems. This allows for immediate application of the theory to a practical situation.

Thus, writing assignments should be carefully designed to insure that they support the learning intended for the course. Check out the "Writing Assignment Reflection Exercise" on the next page for the types of questions you might ask about a writing assignment for your course.

The Fallacy of Assuming They Can Do What's Assigned

In a Department of Education assessment of high school students, involving about 11,500 twelfth graders from 468 schools, the best students--those in the top ten percent--typically wrote minimally developed responses to the persuasive topics. "Their persuasive writing revealed a clear understanding of the basic rhetorical features of persuasion, but continuing difficulty in the use of evidence in support of effective arguments."

Another study [Sherrie Nist, "What the Literature Says About Academic Literacy," *Georgia Journal of Reading*, fall-winter 1993] reported that college teachers tend to overestimate the academic skills of their students.

"College teachers assume certain behaviors that students do not, in fact, have. High school students often have only to listen in class to do well on a high school test, yet college teachers assume that they have learned to take notes (which they haven't) and that they use them to study well (which they don't)."

College teachers also assume that students have learned how to write answers to essay questions, when in fact they have written only multiple-choice tests in high school. In Nist's study, "Students often wrote essays that lacked supporting information, were poorly organized, and lacked analysis and synthesis--something that had been conveyed rather clearly by the professor. In fact, many of the students in the study had a distorted view of what an essay in this class should entail. They wrote three or four sentences and then wondered why they received only a small number of points, or . . . no credit at all."

"In terms of critical thinking, . . . even 'ambitious college-bound seniors' don't think about and interpret information in a discipline the way a college professor does."

All of this suggests that a variety of in-class, short, writing-to-learn activities, especially in the freshman and sophomore years, might be more productive in developing student learning and their academic literacy than traditional writing assignments that assume a skill level students have not yet achieved.

One way to bridge the gap between what we expect of students at the college level and the skills they present when they arrive is through "writing-to-learn" activities that develop their abilities and enhance their learning at the same time. The online text noted on the left by Art Young provides a superb explanation of this practice.

http://wac.colostate.edu/books/young_teaching/

Issues of assessing and evaluating student writing in the disciplines is a perennial issue, and we'll address some of those concerns in our next newsletter.

Writing Assignment Reflection Exercise

What is the character of learning you intend for students in this course? (e.g., solve problems, understand basic concepts, think critically, etc.)

How exactly does this assignment fit with the objectives of your course?

What do you want the students to learn or experience from this writing assignment?

What do you want students to show you in this assignment? (To demonstrate mastery of concepts or texts? To demonstrate logical and critical thinking? To develop an original idea? To learn and demonstrate the procedures, practices, and tools of your field of study?)

How does your writing assignment foster the character of learning you intend for students in this course?

How does the assignment require students to demonstrate the intended knowledge or skills? [see column at right for some non-traditional ways to promote learning through writing.]

What is the purpose of the assignment (e.g., review knowledge already learned, find additional information, synthesize research, examine a new hypothesis)?

What is the required form (e.g., expository essay, lab report, memo, business report)?

Is the assignment focused for student achievement?

Is the assignment consistent with the ability-level of the students? [The best writing experience you had in graduate school might not be the most appropriate for your students.]

How well will this assignment engage the student? [i.e., Is there a natural impetus for writing in the design of the assignment that makes it relevant and engaging for the student?]

Is the assignment sequenced so that students write a draft, receive feedback (from the instructor or fellow students), and then revise it? Such practices, when structured effectively, reinforce the need for student engagement in the writing process and help eliminate the last-minute work that is so often poorly done.

Does the assignment include so many sub-questions that students will be confused about the major issue they should examine? Can you give more guidance about what the paper's main focus should be? Can you reduce the number of sub-questions?

Can you define a hypothetical audience to help students determine which concepts to define and explain? When students write only to the instructor, they may assume that little, if anything, requires explanation. Simply defining the whole class as the intended audience will clarify this issue for students. Some assignments will be suitable for other audiences—which should be specified for the students.

Selecting an Effective Writing Assignment Format

In addition to the standard essay and report formats, several other formats exist that might give students a different slant on the course material or allow them to use slightly different writing skills. Here are some suggestions:

Journals. Journals have become a popular format in recent years for courses that require some writing. In-class journal entries can spark discussions and reveal gaps in students' understanding of the material. Having students write an in-class entry summarizing the material covered that day can aid the learning process and also reveal concepts that require more elaboration. Out-of-class entries involve short summaries or analyses of texts, or are a testing ground for ideas for student papers and reports. Although journals may seem to add a huge burden for instructors to correct, in fact many instructors either spot-check journals (looking at a few particular key entries) or grade them based on the number of entries completed. Journals are usually not graded for their prose style.

Letters. Students can define and defend a position on an issue in a letter written to someone in authority. They can also explain a concept or a process to someone in need of that particular information. If you wish to add a creative element to the writing assignment, you might have students adopt the persona of an important person discussed in your course (e.g., an historical figure) and write a letter explaining his/her actions, process, or theory to an interested person (e.g., "Pretend that you are John Wilkes Booth, and write a letter to the Congress justifying your assassination of Abraham Lincoln," or "Pretend you are Henry VIII writing to Thomas More explaining your break from the Catholic Church").

Editorials. Students can define and defend a position on a controversial issue in the format of an editorial.

Cases. Students might create cases particular to the course's subject matter for other students to solve.

Position Papers. Students can define and defend a position, perhaps as a preliminary step in the creation of a formal research paper or essay.

Imitation of a Text. Students can create a new document "in the style of" a particular writer (e.g., "Create a government document the way Woody Allen might write it" or "Write your own 'Modest Proposal' about a modern issue").

Instruction Manuals. Students write a step-by-step explanation of a process.

Dialogues. Students create a dialogue between two major figures studied in which they not only reveal their theories or thoughts but also explore areas of possible disagreement (e.g., "Write a dialogue between Claude Monet and Jackson Pollock about the nature and uses of art").

Upcoming at the CTE. . .

Brown Bag series (noon in Thayer 120)

21/22 October *"Teaching, Learning, and Their Counterparts"*

There really is nothing "new" in education—just a need to learn from the best thinkers, as this "aged" but provocative article by Mortimer Adler indicates [available from CTE website]. Read it, and come prepared with ideas you'd like to challenge or affirm from your own experience.

TALENT series

(at noon in Thayer 120)

10 November - Visualization and Plotting

Visual representation of relationships, concepts and data can be powerful tools for both instructors and students. At USMA we have a number of software tools to aid in the construction of plots and other graphics. Among these are Excel and Mathematica. Bring ideas for plotting and visualization, and we will discuss how to realize these ideas with the tools available

Call for Presentation Proposals USMA TALENT Conference

Theme: *Student Learning in the Information Age*

Saturday, 9 April 2005

Mark your calendar now!

Full information and proposal format is available on the CTE website.

Proposals should be submitted via e-mail to Anita.Gandolfo@usma.edu **no later than Monday, 10 January 2005.**

New Series—Conversations about Writing



To discuss some of the issues about student writing raised in this newsletter, we're beginning a series of "Conversations about Writing." Our first session is scheduled for **Friday, 12 November**, at noon in Thayer 120.

If you have specific questions or topics you'd like addressed at this session, you're invited to send them to Anita Gandolfo at any time.

119 Thayer Hall

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Dr. Anita Gandolfo
x6155

Asst. Director

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x4257

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