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White Paper
December 6, 2011

What Community College Writing Teachers Need to Know About Engaging Students

Introduction

Yes, students WILL need writing skills in their future careers. But what are we currently teaching them? How to write a perfect five-paragraph essay on Shakespeare? Unless we're training future literature teachers, that type of writing will not serve our students further than their undergraduate degrees. The large majority of students disengage themselves as soon as they walk into our writing classrooms. They're bored before they start because they don't see a connection between the classroom and real life. What's more, we're actually providing a disservice to our students by not preparing them to write well for life. So, what's the solution? How can we both engage our students in the writing classroom and prepare them to write in their future careers? I believe the answer lies in teaching our students to write across the curriculum (WAC) and write in the disciplines (WID), encouraging them to write to learn (WTL) not just learn to write (LTW), and showing writers how to be creative with their non-fiction (CNF) genres.

Methods

Writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines are two hot topics among college writing instructors. Along with writing to learn, learning to write, and creative nonfiction, we have plenty of "new" methods to keep our students entertained and engaged. While most practitioners try to keep each of these methods separate, I would like to combine them in an effort not only to teach my students to write well, but

also to teach them to write for their futures. I believe the best engagement comes when students believe they have a purpose for being in my writing classes.

Learning to Write and Writing Across the Curriculum

Janet Emig's groundbreaking treatise, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," first brought to the attention of the academic community the fact that "writing serves learning uniquely because writing as a process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" (n.p.). She details the differences between writing and talking in language-learning development and then outlines a number of distinct correlations between learning and writing. In my research, it seems as though most authors rightly reference—either directly or indirectly—Emig's ideas when discussing writing theories.

Smart, Hudd, and Delohery equate WAC with WTL. Their premise is that the more (informal) writing students do, the more their thinking and writing skills will improve. Their Concentric Thinking model's three levels use writing as a learning vehicle to move from prioritizing to translating to analogizing (Smart et al. 222–223). The article details reading and journaling exercises using a sociology classroom as an example. In their survey of faculty using WTL methods, Smart et al. report that many teachers use WTL to encourage students to do more critical thinking and to make sure the students are more actively engaged in their own learning (Smart et al. 233). Students' feedback "suggests that this work gives them a sense of both meaning and empowerment" (Smart 235). That is the goal of WAC and WTL: to interact with students in a meaningful learning context.

Learning to Write and Writing in the Disciplines

Cullick and Zawacki focus on WID. While their book is written directly to students, professors in disciplines such as science, business, criminal justice, education, engineering, history, music, nursing, and psychology can pull specific LTW ideas to implement in their own classrooms. The authors summarize specific audiences, genres, purposes, and styles for each area. A general writing professor could likewise use their suggestions to compose targeted assignments for students in their classes that would help students see the career and real-life applications of writing for their futures.

While *Writing in the Disciplines* provides concrete examples, Carter's articles, "Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing in the Disciplines" and "Writing to Learn by Learning to Write in the Disciplines" focus more on the abstractions of WID. He asserts that "writing promotes learning in scientific disciplines" (278). In other words, just performing an experiment will not net the same level of knowledge as doing the experiment and then writing a detailed lab report about it.

Specific Writing Lesson Ideas

Gardner touches on several different aspects of teaching writing, mostly aimed at writing teachers (as opposed to teachers in other fields). Her specific ideas give real-life wings and career aspiration alternatives to the same old blah, five-paragraph essay assignments. On the other hand, professors in other disciplines could easily adapt political and community writing styles to their own fields. In addition, Gardner suggests alternate time frames, positions, attitudes, and formats for writing projects. For instance, students could write a *CSI*-style police report of an incident, a detailed timeline for a history class, an eBay listing, a play, a business text message, or a DVD insert. All of these ideas fall under interactive, creative writing methods and may possibly get students more excited about writing than a five-page essay on Shakespeare would.

"Local Heroes Local Voices" suggests a specific writing activity that could be adapted by a history classroom covering Greek and Roman mythology; students could be required to "interview" a Greek or Roman god as a way of learning more about one of them. In a sociology setting, students could write about a local hero, either from their own society, or a well-known hero in another society. In a business classroom, students could be required to interview a local business person in their target field. In applicable situations, students would be required to ask their interviewees what types of writing they use in real life. This activity seems to fall into the WAC category.

Conciseness seems to be a universal problem for beginning writing students; many write essays as if they were being paid by the word as Dickens was. Technical writers need to learn to be succinct so as not to waste their readers' time. In the world of business, time is money. Sloane's four-step plan begins with students defining conciseness. After all, one cannot emulate what one does not understand. Recognizing

wordiness and revising someone else's work come next. The last step is to have "students write 100-word autobiographical stories," focusing on events related to their families (Sloan, 430). This step-by-step plan provides students with the guidance they need in order to begin writing concisely.

Creative Non-Fiction Writing

Creative non-fiction engages writing students by presenting the facts in an innovative manner. "CNF weaves the writer's experience with the information of the text" (Fox and Lannin, n.p.). The fundamental components of CNF—Gutkind, the father of CNF, calls these the five Rs—are "real life, reflection, research, reading, and (w)riting" (Fox and Lannin, n.p.). Stories engage students. Students can relate to stories better than they can relate to facts sometimes. Why not encourage students to use CNF as a viable mode of WTL as well as LTW when appropriate?

Transitioning from Academics to Businesses

How can technical writing professors help their students transfer their expertise from the academic realm to the workforce realm? Todd points to history as the answer. He compares the writings of Benjamin Franklin to those of Herbert Hoover, which highlights the differences before and after the Industrial Revolution. Basically, technical writing in colonial America was highly individualized, while technical writing in the twentieth century and beyond focuses on the bigger picture: responsibility to professions and businesses. "To help students connect this discussion to their own situations, they then write a brief response comparing their own situation as students-soon-to-be-professionals with the historical situation discussed" (Todd, 78). As a bonus, this type of lesson could function as a WAC assignment between an American history classroom and a technical writing classroom.

Putting It All Together

"Variety is the spice of life," or so the saying goes. I firmly believe that introducing a variety of writing assignments is the best way to keep students' attention in a writing classroom. WAC and WID are excellent methods to ensure that our students learn to

look beyond academic writing and toward real reasons for learning to write efficiently and effectively.

Technology

Any discussion of interactive writing methods would be incomplete without a discussion of how technology is used in modern-day communications. No longer do we teach the Hemingways of the world in isolation. Everyone writes. That writing may be as short and informal as text messages and Facebook statuses or as complicated as books and multi-page websites (Yancey). Kittle calls writing with technology “multimodal” and takes his readers step by step through his process of revamping his curriculum and teaching strategies to include Web 2.0 technologies. He insists that those types of projects demand reader interaction, not just writer input. Kittle says that reciprocal writing projects heighten “students’ level of engagement and ownership” as well as their sense of “value” for their writing (178). Bickmore and Christiansen likewise utilize multimodal composition methods to teach writing for real-life scenarios. They encourage educators to keep up with cutting-edge technologies since we are the leaders of tomorrow’s writers. Lundin uses wikis as her writing technology to foster online collaboration.

Rebecca Worley discusses how “students learn more effectively when the context for the lesson actively mirrors the workplace” (451). I would also argue that writing and learning become more engaging when students are able to see that what they’re learning in the classroom will be used later in their business dealings. Worley gives several specific ideas for fresh types of writing assignments in the corporate and community arenas.

Interactive assignments include writing for specific audiences, not just for professors. Kessler shows how to make students “aware of the power of their pens” (256) through the canons of invention, arrangement, and style (elocution in Aristotle’s original work). She backed up her claim with an effective and touching case study.

Technology, although helpful in many aspects, can also be distracting and disruptive. Some business writing classes may expect students to be proficient in technology instead of taking the time to teach the necessary skills for technological

collaboration. This creates false expectations, wasted time, and frustrations all around. McGrady suggests “that professional writing instructors attend closely to individual students’ technological literacy and to technological literacy’s influence on co-authoring teams” (n.p.). Her research included students in a business writing classes from a broad array of majors; they participated in a collaborative business consulting project using technology in various ways. These students engaged in the consulting project because it was a real-life venture, something they could envision themselves doing a few years down the road after graduation.

Assessment

Grading student writings is time consuming and brain draining. The use of thoughtful rubrics can lighten professors’ loads and still provide effective feedback for students. Strouthopoulous and Peterson detail how their college revamped their writing programs, project expectations, and rubrics to more accurately reflect real-life writing instead of purely academic writing. Such writing involves the students more as they realize there’s a reason for learning how to write effectively and efficiently.

Marchionda and Sommers both discuss explicitly how to hand over classroom grading to the students themselves. They suggest that students are more motivated to learn and to write well if they have some control over their final grades. Each author gives specific details on his/her point systems to make them easy to emulate.

Grading collaborative writing projects can be tricky for many reasons, but Daemmrich asserts that teachers should not avoid those types of assignments. She sees collaborative assignments as bridges between personal writing and academic writing. She asks students to evaluate the other members of their groups as part of the collaboration process and takes their input into account as she grades the overall project. In addition, Daemmrich concludes that collaborative writing projects improve “the level of student engagement and satisfaction with the course” (171). Engagement equals positive interaction.

Writing is subjective, that is true; however, effective rubrics can put more objectivity into grading writing projects. “From Rigidity to Freedom: An English Department’s Journey in Rethinking how We Teach and Assess Writing” brings into

focus what we value most in student writings. Those core values—purpose, critical thinking/analysis, intertextuality, and audience awareness for Strouthopoulos and Peterson (53)—become the essence of our grading rubrics. Of course, each teacher, class, and assignment will have additional considerations as appropriate.

Students

Engaging students ought to be our main concern when teaching writing classes. Although we cannot guarantee that every student will excel at or enjoy every writing assignment, we can and should take student feedback seriously. The more students feel they have control over their projects, the more they will be engaged. The more students feel that their work has real-life value, the more they will be engaged.

Other factors that lead to more positive feelings include composing in multiple modes (Bickmore and Christiansen, Frost et al., and Kittle), composing for real-life audiences (Kessler), interaction (Lundin), clear directions, and as many details as possible about the projects (Gardner).

Students sometimes appreciate the camaraderie of collaboration, while other times they dread the process. Those who appreciate collaboration generally work well in groups, work hard to contribute more than their share, and work at bouncing ideas off one another. Students who dread the collaborative process worry that their grade will be negatively affected by others' efforts, or lack thereof. Other students who don't appreciate working with others for a shared grade prefer to do everything their own way. These negative thought patterns will only worsen as they make the transition from academia to the workforce. The best way to deal with them is to nip them in the bud firmly but gently. Many students, especially those who have limited work experience, do not realize how much they will be required to work with others in their chosen careers.

Teachers

While our classroom focus should be on our students, as writing instructors we ought not be complacent in our composition training alone. Ongoing education will keep us up to date with technology, teaching methods, and trainees.

Gardner's chapters on how to design writing assignments and what makes them effective remind us that creating writing assignments for our students is a writing activity in and of itself and should be treated as such. The components of an effective writing assignment that will produce productive interaction include the following: audience (student academic level), purpose (what we are trying to accomplish, not what we want our students to accomplish), and components (define expectations and provide support). We need to make sure that each and every writing assignment provides clear directives on the content and scope, the exact organization and development we expect, and guidelines on the audience and focus we want our students to use.

Bridging the Gap

Community colleges can benefit in several ways from implementing these engaging methods. Many college students view community colleges as a quick way to a (new) career. In addition, skills such as those taught in general English courses are viewed as unnecessary roadblocks instead of necessary stepping stones to certificate vocations. Engaging students in the writing classroom leads to a higher level of learning and greater preparation for jobs.

Teaching students to write for their futures engages their minds in a way that purely academic writing does not. Academics are not an end unto themselves, at least not for most community college students. Academics are a means to an end. By opening our students' eyes to their future possibilities and responsibilities, we are providing them with concrete reasons to engage their minds in our writing classrooms. No longer will professors hear, "But when am I ever going to have to write in my career?"

The chasm between boring, formulaic essays and engaging, futures-oriented writing is not as wide as it looks. So, how can we bridge it? The bridge starts with conversations between professors in different specialties. Writing teachers need to talk to those working in careers outside of academia and discipline professors to find out what types of writing are actually done in the field. What does an actual biology lab report look like? How does a nurse write a patient update? Do police officers need to write? Teachers just teach, not write themselves, right? Are mathematicians just about

numbers? Even one-year certificate students will need to learn to write effectively and efficiently in careers such as auto mechanics, dental assisting, cosmetology, and welding. WAC methods enhance the writing classroom; the best writing teachers can become the best WAC teachers. In turn, WAC teachers will produce students who are engaged and who feel comfortable writing in their chosen disciplines.

Likewise, teachers in the disciplines ought to talk with writing teachers to discover ways to make their writing assignments more effective. Grammar and spelling do matter, contrary to popular opinion. While career instructors may know what a good lab report or a well-worded proposal ought to look like, they may lack the knowledge to translate that into appropriate writing assignments for their students. Even more likely, career instructors often view grading writing assignments as their least favorite teaching chore. Given proper tools and suggestions, discipline teachers can change their most dreaded assignments into useful projects.

Open symposiums, white papers, faculty fair days, and shared projects—in short, knowledge—can enhance students' experiences with writing by getting professors across the chasm between straight academic writing and future writing.

Conclusion

Academic writing doesn't have to be boring; neither does it have to be a goal unto itself. By teaching our students how to write and how to write in real-life scenarios, we are teaching them to write for their futures. When students are able to grasp the true usefulness of their writing assignments, they will be more engaged in the classroom.

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