INCORPORATING WRITING INTO THE PLP CLASSROOM

What are possible goals & benefits of incorporating writing into the classroom?

“...learning of content is positively affected when students write more frequently over time...” (VanDerWeghe 2005, reviewing Bangert-Drowns, Hurly, and Wilkinson 2004)

“...just 5 min of writing on a topic per week (45 min per semester) produced significantly higher scores on test items than did the same amount of time spent thinking.” (Drabick, Weisberg, Paul and Bubier 2007)

“The informal and formal writing exercises in the learning community help our students make informed analyses and develop critical thinking skills. Write-to-learn and inquiry-based learning provide fruitful insights for our students and prepare them for the assessment of the learning community, further work in the college core, and the adjustment to forthcoming college work.” (Dotolo and Nicolay 2008)

Writing...

- can prompt participation in conversation in a discussion-based classroom by allowing participants to collect their thoughts
- offers space for analysis and engagement for all students, including less vocal participants
- improves and deepens understanding of content
- familiarizes students with how to write on the subject in question (Bangert-Drowns, Hurly, and Wilkinson 2004)
- increases facility and depth of reading, self-reflection, critical thinking, and writing (Sommers 2013)
- is a metacognitive activity that improves transfer of learning
- improves final writing assignments through familiarity with instructor/facilitator expectations

How can we include informal writing in the classroom?

“This review suggests that the writing tasks employed by writing-to-learn interventions need not be elaborate.” (Bangert-Drowns, Hurly, Wilkinson 2004)

Kinds of writing to assign

- Write-to-learn
- Freewriting or quickwriting
- Visual mapping strategies
- Filling in diagrams or theoretical models

Kinds of questions to ask

“Writing interventions in which students were asked to reflect on their current understandings, confusions, and learning processes typically yielded more positive results...” (Bangert-Drowns, Hurly and Wilkinson 2004)

- **summary** (assesses recall, reading comprehension, and concise restatement of information)
- **personal response** (encourages student to connect to material)
- **analysis** (critical thinking about material, and its construction and context)
- **application/synthesis** (connections between texts, and to subjective experience or larger spheres of discussion/understanding/context)
- **metacognitive reflection** on personal response, confusion, learning
- **metacognitive reflection** on how the writer might apply learning in the future
- **list of [limited number of] questions** writers have about the topic/issue
- **mapping strategies** for key concepts or words (encourages individual or small groups to reorient and justify their understanding of how complicated concepts relate to one another)

**When can we include writing in the classroom?**

“Longer Writing Assignments Matter Less Than More-Frequent Writing Opportunities

It is suggested that longer writing assignments may seem onerous for some students and work against motivation to achieve more through writing; this is especially true for those who struggle as writers. The implication here is that shorter writing tasks, such as quickwrites, may be more beneficial.” (VanDerWeghe 2005, reviewing Bangert-Drowns, Hurly, and Wilkinson 2004)

**Beginning of discussion**
- Freewriting, Quickwriting or Write-to-learn
- Using mix of recall, response, analysis, and application
- If using informal writing throughout the semester, consider scaffolding (summary to analysis to synthesis/application) so that as writers become familiar with expectations of the class, the reading, the writing, and the kind of discussion and analysis required, the skills demanded become more complex

**End of discussion**
- If you have been working with a social or theoretical model, asking participants to fill a thorough model of an example text/situation (individually or in small groups) is an excellent way to reinforce and deepen learning of the concept
- End of a discussion is an excellent opportunity to ask for analysis or application, as it reinforces class discussion and allows writers to further their thinking on the given topic
- Allows for differentiation as individuals connect to relevant details and build on prior knowledge

**Throughout discussion**
- KWL(Q) (Know, Want to know, Learn, Questions) 3- or 4-column record of conversation

**Middle of class**
- Should a particularly difficult concept or conversation happen—or even, a hot discussion spot—consider pausing, posing a question to students, and giving them time to respond in writing
- If this is used in response to an emotionally difficult moment, use your judgment on whether to collect this writing. Not collecting may give students space to air their feelings without fear of judgment or reprisal

**What kind of feedback is useful for student writing?**

“We comment on students’ writing not only to demonstrate the presence of a reader but also to help our students become that questioning reader themselves, because ultimately we believe that becoming such a reader will help them read and respond to their own thoughts and words and develop control over their writing” (Sommers 2013).
“One might further speculate that feedback to student writing specifically directed at supporting metacognition and learning strategies could prove most effective...”  (Bangert-Drowns, Hurly and Wilkinson 2004)

“Assessment feedback can enhance performance, but not in every context and not for all students...A fundamental requirement of [Higher Education] is to facilitate high-quality feedback exchanges...An enhanced understanding of how individuals process information within the complex networks of learning communities is essential.”  (Evans 2013)

Informal writing

- Feedback is as much social and relational as it is about “content and organization” (Evans 2013)
- Productive written feedback requires a thoughtful interrogation of the power dynamic enacted through fixed writing, and a navigation of student/participant and instructor/facilitator anxiety
- When assigning informal writing, encourage thoughtful engagement rather than polished ideas and sentences, or perfect grammar
- In feedback, focus on depth of thought and engagement
- Often, beginning writing education has focused on surface-level considerations of form, and writers have become so anxious to produce “polished” sentences for evaluation that deep engagement becomes lost. In feedback, try not to focus on lower-level concerns such as grammar construction and sentence structure, which even higher-level writers may struggle with in improvisatory circumstances
- Offer a mix of
  - questions which further the writer’s thinking, and
  - personal responses which show a reader is personally engaging in the text
- If grammar, organization, or handwriting is unclear enough that it impedes reader understanding, then it can be useful to question it

Commenting on longer papers (slp & Sommers)

- Do not focus on lower-level concerns such as grammar construction and sentence structure, which might disappear if the writer were to revise global thinking, and which could be addressed by proofreading. Too much feedback is as detrimental as too little
- Try to focus on one or two overarching areas of growth, so as not to overwhelm the writer
- Consider offering both marginal comments and end comments or an end letter
- In the marginalia, offer a mix of
  - questions which further the writer’s thinking
  - personal responses which show a reader is personally engaging in the text
  - critical observations about the organization, tone, logic, and effectiveness of the paper
- In the end letter, consider
  - thanking the writer for their work, and any particular aspect of passion, creativity, or engagement that struck you
  - highlighting a strength of the writing and/or attention to the assignment
  - observing an area of growth in the piece
  - directing reader attention to pertinent marginal comments
  - offering a possible revision for the area of growth, so the writer can imagine a concrete way forward in the next piece
For further information, clarification, and examples, refer to Nancy Sommer’s Responding to Student Writers, particularly “Setting the Scene for Responding”

Peer response

“Responses to student writers come in many forms—written or spoken comments on rough or final drafts, for example, or e-mail messages or discussion posts responding to specific queries about thesis sentences or research proposals. Responses to student writers also come from many sources—from teachers, from classroom peers, and from writing center tutors.” (Sommers 2013)

- After establishing some comfort level with writing in the class setting, and expectations for writing engagement, consider having peer readers review informal writing
- Peer response for informal writing may be particularly useful if focused on furthering the conversation started by the writer
- Peer response for longer, formal writing can also strengthen community and produce useful, critical readers; peer workshops are slightly beyond the scope of this horizon

When should we grade in-class student writing? What does grading look like?

- **Check system** (plus or minus optional) is a useful system
- There is no need to collect writing if you are using it solely as a preparation for conversation, or as intervention to difficult conversation
- However, collecting writing and providing even minimal feedback can prepare a writer more fully for what to expect for a final writing assignment
- (In my opinion) feedback which encourages metacognition is more important than grading
- And, students often respond positively to some system for accountability

For further information or reflection, feel free to contact slp at sarahlouisepieplow@gmail.com

References


