“How & Why to Teach Students through Writing

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“I learned to write by writing…”
- Francine Prose

“Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.”
- E.L. Doctorow

Prose’s and Doctorow’s emphasis on what it takes to learn how to write can reveal what our students miss: practice. In thirteen years of teaching first-year English Literature and Composition, I, like many teachers, have complained about my students’ writing. I have been frustrated to see that many of my students fail to pick up their marked papers to review and internalize feedback. As a writing centre coordinator, I have heard many university teachers wonder if the problem with student writing originates with lack of preparation in high school. I’ve also heard some question university admissions requirements and wonder about students’ time devoted to gaming and social media. When it comes to social media, though, most students have acquired a lot of practice with writing in non-traditional formats, and the growth of technology-based communication means that they spend “a considerable amount of their time” writing (Lenhart, Arafah, Smith & Magill, 2009). In terms of communicating clearly and/or persuasively in formal academic writing, though, students need much more practice, feedback, and opportunities to revise.

Requiring students to write more often will help them learn how to write more clearly and persuasively. Requiring students to write more often is important to their learning about a subject, and thinking more clearly about it. Arum & Roksa analyze over 2,300 undergraduate students in 24 institutions in the much talked-about Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses (2011) and urge universities to assign more writing and reading, not only to challenge students but also to improve learning.

They name writing as a rigorous and challenging experience in an undergraduate program (Arum and Roksa, 2011). Ballif (2006) would agree, pointing out that student writing skills or literacy tasks are inseparable from ways of knowing: “[T]o teach writing is to teach the ways of knowing unique to any discipline: the methodology of inquiry, the conventions of evidence, and the mode of presentation.” If we know that writing is a rigorous and challenging experience that helps students learn, why aren’t we assigning more writing?

The authors of Academically Adrift report that “increases in class size and course loads are leading [professors] to cut down on the ambition of student assignments simply to keep up with grading” (paraphrased by Jaschik, 2011). Certainly, many faculty, when deciding
whether to include writing assignments in their courses, are concerned about time spent designing and explaining assignments and then grading and providing helpful feedback (Harfitt, 2011; Taylor, 2008; Ward & Jenkins, 1992). Marking written work is especially daunting for faculty teaching large classes, even with a team of TAs. To make matters worse, when students fail to pick up their marked work, assigning term papers can seem like a hollow, time-consuming exercise.

Strategies often taken to alleviate these pressures include referring students to the writing centre, or obliging them to enroll in a composition class: we tell students to “go and learn how to write.” Referral and “remediation” – a term unfortunate for its medical implication – presume that poor writing is a sickness that needs a quick cure, and that writing is a separately acquired skill. Of course, remediation is also cheaper than establishing Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC).1 Writing, though, is not something we learn once and for all; it is an ongoing process fundamental to thinking and learning. Writing often is known to stimulate student learning and engagement (Beil & Knight, 2007; Boyd, 2010; Kuh, 2008). Light (2003) found that “[S]tudent engagement with the subject matter being taught increases significantly when they are more frequently asked to write about that subject, particularly in courses in their junior and senior years.”

Some U of S professors in non-writing intensive disciplines incorporate opportunities for students to write, carving out existing class and lab time. We can imagine why they do it, but how do they do it? Experts in writing pedagogy have developed realistic, straightforward approaches for teaching writing in any discipline, listed here in order of small time commitment to large time commitment. Some are feasible in large class settings:

**Emphasize writing as process:**
Academic writing is often an isolated task, and so the process can be invisible to others. Thus, students can misunderstand, or neglect the importance of, the writing process. Discuss the writing process with your students rather than simply focusing on what the final product should look like. Some professors reveal their own writing processes, and ask students to share what helps them when they write. For instance, College of Agriculture professors of a 250-student class, Fran Walley and Dan Pennock, wrote a paragraph each describing their journeys learning how to write, and spoke about their own writing processes in class. Professor Emeritus John Thompson used live writing in his sociology classes, essentially researching, outlining, drafting and editing a paper in front of his students (MacPherson, 2004). Inspired by Thompson, but not nearly as brave, I have used live writing in smaller ways, showing students how to respond to short-answer questions. This takes approximately 20 minutes of class time, and students are always enthusiastic critics of my work. They come to understand that people whom they think of as good writers go through a process, too. It is important to think out loud when doing writing live, explaining your processes, questions, and decisions. At certain points, invite students to help you make decisions and give their reasons for their advice. Remind students that your way is not...
the only way by giving them lists of strategies for each stage of the research, drafting, and editing and proofreading process. A great exercise: before class, draft and revise a paragraph in PiratePad (piratepad.net). When you get to class, use the Time Slider feature to press “play”: this way, you can show your students what a decision-filled, messy process writing can be.

Assign non-traditional writing assignments: Often, formal writing assignments just elicit mimicry of reflection. Examples include assigning summaries, asking students to articulate pro- and/or con- arguments on an issue, or requesting that they apply and/or compare theories. More writing-to-learn activities can be found here: http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop5.cfm http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/wtl.html

Establish efficient marking systems: According to Beach & Friedrich (2006), effective feedback is “specific, descriptive, nonjudgmental, and varied according to students’ phases of development” (p. 231). A well-designed rubric guides students before a paper is due and makes it likely that students will read feedback once papers are returned. Rubrics are assessment tools that evaluate performance by dissecting individual parts of the product or performance and comparing these parts or performance against systematic criteria. From there, the marker can produce a score for each part of the product or performance first, and then combine these scores to obtain a total score (Montgomery, 2000; Ntiko, 2001). In addition to rubrics, professors can give audio feedback as a digital recording, or type instead of hand-write their comments (Ewert-Bauer, 2009). With effective feedback, students will more likely engage in critical self-assessment and in revision (Beach & Friedrich, 2006).

Incorporate low- or no-stakes Writing to Learn (WTL) activities: Since writing takes practice, providing opportunities for our students to do some low-stakes “writing-to-learn” (Elbow, 2003) activities in or out of class – rather than simply focusing on high-stakes exam answers and term papers – has been proven successful in teaching and engaging students. Low- or no-stakes writing activities can be a quick way to engage students and to encourage critical thinking and reflection. These activities work to help students think more carefully through positions, and to actively engage students in course topics while encouraging critical thinking and self-reflection.

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A discipline’s style, which can stifle deep learning, critical reflection, and discussion. However, a non-traditional writing assignment – if introduced, structured, and evaluated appropriately – can create an informal space for reflection, expression, argument and discussion. For example, a class blog reflecting course controversies and themes can act as an alternative to a traditional essay assignment. Staff at the Gwenna Moss Centre can give professors advice about creating non-traditional assignments successfully.

Scaffold larger assignments: Students arrive at a stronger final product given the opportunity to focus on smaller, more manageable writing tasks that build toward their final drafts. Dividing the writing process into prewriting, drafting, editing and proofreading activities can help students to achieve a stage-specific product. For example, reinforcement, … and joint problem-solving” (Topping, 2005, p. 632). There is “concrete, replicable evidence of the impact trained peer tutors can have, contributing to the growing body of studies that this is both an efficient and effective way of supporting student writers” (Bromley & Rossman Regaignon, 2011). Funding for such a program must come from a department or college as part of a larger strategy to improve writing, and support in the form of training of peer mentors can come from the University Learning Centre.

CONCLUSION

We need students to learn how to write clear, grammatically correct “high-stakes” texts such as essays and reports, to show that they can communicate ideas and arguments and demonstrate the ability to synthesize rather than parrot ideas. However, the products of writing are not everything. The writing process is crucial to the quality of the final product, and it opens space for slow, careful thinking, with an audience in mind. Our graduates should be able to produce excellent essays and reports by the time they graduate, but while they are here, they also need the
opportunity to write so that they may wrestle with ideas, converse with others, make connections, and think clearly.

I will end by taking my thesis a little further. Last year, a U of S group7 discussed challenges to helping students improve their writing, and agreed that the main problems were a need for more teaching support and lack of a culture of writing. Filreis (1997) writes that a culture of writing is “characterized by an active concern across the institution for clear thinking realized through the written word.” The ultimate goal is to stimulate this culture formally, even institutionally. In the meantime, we can do it individually. Communicate to students that writing matters in your discipline. There are simple ways to keep your students’ pens scratching and keyboards clicking, learning “as they go” (Doctorow).

ENDNOTES
1WAC is a pedagogical movement deployed in over 70% of US institutions (Thaiss & Porter, 2010). WAC philosophy can be summarized as follows: “writing is the responsibility of the entire academic community; writing must be integrated across department[s]; writing instruction must be continuous throughout…undergraduate education; writing promotes learning; and only by practicing the conventions of an academic discipline will students be able to communicate effectively within that discipline” (Graves, 2009). Currently, 18 Canadian institutions offer certificates, minors, or majors in writing; however, WAC movements in Canada “have not proliferated or grown” (Hunt, 2009). SFU and the U of A have writing intensive course requirements and other WAC initiatives.

2The Campus Writing Network was composed of professors, ULC staff members, writing tutors, peer mentors, a USSU rep, and Language Centre staff

REFERENCES


