

Writing Across the Curriculum

Composition classes often focus on two types of discourse—exposition and what is frequently identified as creative writing. Exposition generally refers to the writing of essays and eventually research papers. Creative writing usually refers to composing literary genres—poetry, short stories, dramas, and even novels. Sometimes we also ask students to write literary reviews and analyses.

While practicing these discourse modes may help students discover literary talents and develop skills necessary for some academic writing, the range is limited. Experts in composition instruction have been urging teachers to expand these boundaries to include many more discourse forms. The business world has also added its voice to this call for expansion so as to better prepare students for the kinds of writing tasks they will face as adults. They may need to know how to write a classified ad, a contract, a memo, and/or a letter of complaint. They may need to know how to write directions for using equipment or products or how to write computer software manuals. They may need to know how to take minutes at a meeting and prepare a formal business report or even a grant proposal. They may need to know how to summarize material so it will fit on one page to be FAXed. They may need to know how to write a recipe to share with friends. They may need to know how to maintain anthropological field notes and how to present an analysis of survey data. They may even need to know how to compose greeting card messages, picture captions, journalistic articles, or programs for dramatic, musical, or religious events. This list could go on and on.

The problem, of course, is that there is not enough time to teach all of the possible discourse modes. Certainly the English teacher alone cannot begin to engage students in all the possible forms of written communication. Furthermore, the English teacher is a specialist. The composition teacher knows some things about literary and academic writing, but he/she probably does not have the expertise necessary for teaching the forms which are specific to other subject areas. What kinds of writing do mathematicians do? How is each organized? Upon what criteria are they judged? What kinds of writing do historians do? How are these different from the kinds written by other social scientists? What is a political tract? How do you know one when you see it? What do Supreme Court decisions look like in print? How is the Congressional Record organized and what does it include? Those who should be best prepared to teach students to write social studies, math, science, home economics, business, and so on are those who teach those subject areas.

While this conclusion seems logical, two factors make implementation difficult. First, few subject area teachers have actually studied the discourse forms in their own fields. Yes, they have studied the content, but they may never have looked at how the material is presented. Most of us have studied the Declaration of Independence, but how many social studies teachers have ever examined it as an example of how a political declaration is structured? How many have ever tried to compose such a declaration? While English teachers and to some extent business teachers have analyzed discourse forms, few other teachers in other subject areas have done so. Furthermore, unless these teachers have had some continued contacts with their fields outside the classroom, their knowledge of subject-specific forms may be limited. For example, if a science teacher has never participated in a research program or worked in a commercial laboratory, he/she may have little knowledge of the real world writing associated with the subject matter. Of course, as long as American education focuses on what students know rather than what they can do, teachers of other subjects have

little inclination to encourage students to engage in historical, scientific, or even vocational writing. Thus, the system itself tends to discourage writing across the curriculum. However, if performance assessment becomes a reality, this situation will change.

The second problem may be an even more serious stumbling block, but it is one we as teachers of writing must recognize as our own creation. Many teachers, even some who teach composing, consider themselves to be incompetent writers. They feel as if they have nothing to teach students about writing because they consider themselves unable to write well. In general, this self-assessment is the result of their own school experiences with writing. Further, their reluctance to teach writing may well hinge on their belief that the way they were taught (or not taught) to write is the method which is still being used. Since they did not learn to write well themselves, how could they possibly teach others?

Further discussion with these people often reveals these misconceptions about what we mean when we say that all teachers should teach writing. A few will admit that they truly dislike writing and feel unable to write well. However, most will object on the basis of the following: an inability to use mechanics and spell accurately and/or an inability to compose literary writing and the common school forms or exposition. And no matter how they feel about themselves as writers, they are likely to resist teaching writing on the basis that they do not want to grade all those compositions, especially when multiple choice tests, which are much easier to grade, readily tell them whether or not students have comprehended the material.

Whether or not we convince other teachers to teach writing as a part of their curriculum, we need to let them know about the changes that are taking place in the composing curriculum and the alteration in methods. We need their support and their understanding. If they assume that we are teaching writing the same way they were taught, they may end up working against us without even knowing it. Therefore, we have a responsibility to inform them and keep them abreast of what we are doing. Some may even find this new approach so appealing that they want to try it just because it makes sense to them and seems much less threatening.

Other teachers may need to be convinced that they should incorporate more writing into their classrooms. However, to convince them we have to consider what is apt to persuade them. Better writing is probably not a goal which is high on their priority list, nice, but not essential in their classes. Besides, they may still consider teaching writing to be the English teachers territory, not theirs.

The appeal that is most likely to work is the one which states that students will learn material in more depth and retain it longer if they write about it. We aren't really asking teachers in other subject areas to teach writing. Rather, we are asking them to use writing as a tool for learning subject matter. Students should not be just learning to write, but writing to learn. Further, teachers of other subjects need to know that this learning generally occurs while the writing is being done. Since evaluation after the action of writing will be of limited benefit, much of the writing that students do in order to learn content need not be graded.

What examples of such non-graded writing-to-learn can be given to illustrate the idea? One of the easiest ways to incorporate writing into any subject area is through a journal or learning log. Students could be required to spend the last

5 minutes of each period summarizing the class session. Sometimes students could be required to respond to their textbook readings at the start of each class. A few of these could be shared in order to initiate discussion. In a science class, students could record in journals their predictions of what will occur when an experiment is performed and why. Then these predictions can be judged against what actually happened and, if needed, an explanation given in writing about why the previous reasoning was faulty. In physical education, students could keep progress journals in which they self-evaluate their growth in skill development each day.

Journal work can become burdensome, however, so the teacher may want to consider some other options. At the start of the class, each student could submit a written question. The teacher could quickly glance over these and try to build in the answers during the lecture or discussion. Student-written questions could be used as the basis for a small group discussion or reviewing for a test.

This is only a limited sampling of the kinds of tasks which would enhance the learning of subject matter while increasing minimally, if at all, the teacher's paper load. Further, if students find that these tasks produce their own rewards in the form of increased understanding and better test scores, they may do the tasks even if they are not required.

The goal of these activities is to encourage students to learn through writing. Most of these tasks are short but purposeful from the student's point of view. Often, pieces of limited length demand much thought. The important point here is the frequency of writing. If students wrote more often and used writing in ways that they see as beneficial, composing longer pieces might be less laborious. Further, these pieces serve their own ends. They should not be graded. That is not to say that longer papers should be avoided or that papers should not be graded. Ways do exist to make longer papers better. Rarely are adults asked to compose essays and articles about unfamiliar subjects. We write about subjects we know well and those we care about. Students, however, must often write about subjects they understand only vaguely if at all. In many instances, students fear writing because the task is little more than a test. Longer papers are a double-barreled threat. Not only must students try to prove that they have a satisfactory grasp of the topic but they must demonstrate their knowledge through a medium with which they are not fully comfortable. They are not sure of the subject matter and they aren't sure of themselves as writers.

Improving writing means helping students feel more confident about both subject matter and writing. During one English course for college freshmen, students selected a subject of personal interest and pursued that single subject through the writing of at least three papers—an interior monologue, an interview, and a memoir. They explored the subject from several different perspectives. However, by continuing to use the same subject matter for three papers, they were able to focus more attention on writing effectively which, of course, was the goal of the course. While this is not a perfect model for freshmen composition courses, it illustrates the point about helping students feel more secure when they write. Another approach is to have students complete some preliminary but short writings prior to composing a longer paper. Yet another idea is to provide opportunities for students to share ideas orally and question each other prior to and/or during the composition.

Longer pieces of writing could be used in a variety of ways. For example, students could be assigned various parts of chapters to summarize. When it is time to discuss the chapter, students could share the summaries and revise according to student recommendations until all the major points have been

included. These could then be duplicated for all students to review prior to a test.

In general, when students write in other subject areas, they do so in isolation as if sharing writing is akin to cheating on a test. When adults write, they often verbalize their ideas to others before they begin to compose, often even before they consider writing. As they put the work together, they often continue to share their thoughts or even their rough drafts. It is common to share the nearly final draft with someone else for some editorial comment. Students, however, may not consider such sharing as appropriate. Indeed, they may feel uncomfortable sharing their ideas among their peers. However, the classroom setting can make such conversation legitimate. The hope, of course, is that if students become more comfortable expressing themselves in a literate manner inside the classroom walls, they will become better able to do so in their daily lives. Instead of requiring that each student write a paper, the task could be assigned to a small group that must collaboratively produce one paper.

Many teachers in other subject areas do require students to complete research papers. Often, however, the only people who see the results are the writer and the teacher. Other students never have a chance to learn about those topics. Research papers could be exchanged and assigned as reading and the major points reported to the class by the reader. Or perhaps the project could be redesigned so that students create scripted multi-media productions which are presented to classmates rather than submitting traditional papers.

One additional point needs to be addressed here. Whenever, educators begin to discuss writing across the curriculum, many will immediately think of essay exams as a method of incorporating more writing into other subject areas. Writing essays can enhance thinking about the topic. However, essay exams tend to encourage writers to memory dump and to ignore the writing processes which produce the most effective writing. Furthermore, essay tests are difficult to grade objectively. What is of even deeper concern is that these exams place writing in a very unfavorable light. If exams are the only time when students are asked to write extended prose, they will associate writing with testing. Writing will be seen as something which is of little personal value in terms of learning, but of great value to the teacher as a means of validating knowledge. Therefore, essay tests should be used sparingly and should not be the only kind of writing students do in other subject areas.

If we expect students to write more effectively, then we must provide the instruction which is necessary. Each discipline has its own particular requirements, formats, and expectations. An explication of a poem is not the same as a laboratory report in science. A business letter and a memo are also different. Literary reviews are distinct from reports of historical research. No English department can possibly teach students all of the myriad forms of writing. Few English instructors are truly comfortable writing in these specialized forms themselves. This is one major reason that writing must be taught across the curriculum. If we want students to become literate, then we must acknowledge that there are different kinds of writing associated with various disciplines. True literacy means being able to cope with these differences, both as readers and as writers.

Students need to write and they need to write more than just answers to questions at the ends of chapters. They need opportunities to explore the various discourse modes which are subject-specific. Also, they need to use writing regularly to stimulate and improve their own learning. This kind of writing cannot be done in the English classroom. However, composition teachers

can be very helpful in recommending ways in which teachers in other subject areas can use writing as a teaching-learning tool without negating the composing instruction which occurs in the English classroom. If done properly, the use of writing in other subject areas can actually lighten those teachers' burdens by enhancing the effectiveness of their instruction.

Recommended Further Reading:

Atwell, N. (ltd.) (1900). *Coming to know: Writing to learn in the intermediate grades*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Bechtel, J. (1985). *Improving writing and learning: A handbook for teachers in every class*. Newton, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Brown, J., Phillips, L., & Stephens, E. (1993). *Toward literacy: Theory and applications for teaching writing in the content areas*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Gere, A. (Ed.) (1985). *Roots in sawdust: Writing to learn across the disciplines*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Hollingsworth, H., & Eastman, S. (1988). *Teaching writing in every class: A guide for grades 6-12*. Newton, MA: Allyn & Bacon.