Writing across the Curriculum

The Teaching Center
University of Florida

Angela M. Kohnen
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Food for Thought...

The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students’ level of engagement—whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students’ level of interest in it—is stronger than the relationship between students’ engagement and any other course characteristic.

--Richard Light (2001)
Today’s Goals

Over the next two hours, we will...

• Define “writing to learn” and “learning to write in the disciplines”
• Explore the connections between writing and critical thinking
• Experience some strategies to embed low stakes writing into any course
• Discuss ways to teach formal writing in your particular discipline
Purpose and Non-Purpose

**Purpose:** To leave this session with a few concrete ideas for adding more purposeful writing to your courses that are well-supported by current research.

**Non-purpose:** To develop a complete set of writing assignments; to explore all the theoretical underpinnings of writing in the academic disciplines.
To get us started:
Session norms and some vocab

• I will ask you to write throughout the session. Please engage with all the writing activities for the full time provided.

• I will not make you read anything you write in its entirety (though you may be asked to read excerpts). I will not collect your writing. No one will judge what you write. Don’t be nervous.

• **Free-writing**: write continuously for the allotted time without stopping. If you get stuck, just write “I don’t know” until a new idea pops into your mind.
To begin our session, please

1. Read the handout “Natural Critical Learning Environments” (annotate it if you wish)

2. When you are done reading, please begin Free-Writing about what you’ve read. Consider the following:
   1. How do these ideas compare with your own experiences, as a teacher or a student?
   2. How does this handout connect to writing?
   3. What questions or concerns do you have about this handout?
   4. What other thoughts do you have about this session or this handout?
Mix and Mingle
Return to your seat

- Reread what you wrote, considering what you just heard from others

- Spend the next three minutes adding to what you just wrote
Summary of What We’ve Done and Why

• _Writing_ can be an effective way to start a class period. Writing requires _active engagement_ on the part of every student—100% participation immediately. Writing about texts can be an effective way to invite students into the academic conversation.

• _Writing_ and _talking_ are connected processes. Good writing grows out of good talking. Good talking (especially classroom discussion) can be inspired by good writing.
Why add writing to all classes???

Writing is an essential part of a “natural critical learning environment” (Bain, 2004)

Writing promotes active learning and student engagement (Gee, 2017)

Writing can introduce students to disciplinary conversations and ways of thinking (Moje, 2015)

Writing is connected to critical thinking (Bean, 2011)
What is Critical Thinking?

Critical Thinking includes:
• Wrestling with a problem
• Identifying and challenging assumptions
• Exploring alternate ways of thinking and acting
• Ultimately developing a proposition that can be justified by reasons and evidence (while also being willing to abandon the proposition is a better one is found)

Kurfiss: “In critical thinking, all assumptions are open to question, divergent views are aggressively sought, and the inquiry is not biased in favor of a particular outcome.”
Writing and Critical Thinking

Research has identified 8 principles of effective college courses that promote critical thinking. Three are especially related to writing:

• Problems, questions, or issues are the point of entry into the subject and a source of motivation for sustained inquiry
• Courses are “assignment centered” rather than “text” or “lecture centered.” Goals, methods, and evaluation emphasize using content rather than simply acquiring it.
• Students are required to formulate and justify their ideas in writing or other appropriate modes

*Based on Kurfiss (1988), as reproduced in Bean (2011)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses that Promote Critical Thinking</th>
<th>Courses that Do Not</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems, questions, or issues are the point of entry into the subject and a source of motivation for sustained inquiry</td>
<td>Factual information is the point of entry into the subject area. Content and basic skills are taught as separate from (and often a prerequisite for) inquiry</td>
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<td>Students are required to formulate and justify their ideas in writing or other appropriate modes</td>
<td>Students are required to demonstrate their learning via multiple choice tests, problem sets, or papers that are evaluated only as final products. Reproducing existing knowledge is the goal.</td>
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Brainstorm/Free-Write

What are the problems or questions that are key to your course or your discipline?

Example, using my course “Teaching Multiliteracies”:

• Problem: “Texts” in the world are multimodal and multilingual. The typical literacy curriculum in K-12 is print-dominant and monolingual.

• Questions: How does one read a multimodal text? What learning experiences invite young people to become multiliterate? How does multiliteracies pedagogy work in various content areas and grade levels?
Problems and Questions as the Basis for Writing and Critical Thinking

Your list of problems and questions is the key to adding writing and critical thinking to any course.

Each of your problems and questions can be presented to students as a critical thinking task (one that allows student to wrestle with the problem, examine assumptions, look at the problem from alternate points of view, weigh evidence, and reach tentative but justifiable conclusions).

Tasks can be: formal writing assignments, exploratory writing assignments, small group tasks, class discussion starters, practice exam questions.
Two (related) kinds of writing you may use

“Writing to learn”: writing-to-learn activities are short, impromptu or otherwise informal writing tasks that help students think through key concepts or ideas presented in a course. Often, these writing tasks are limited to less than five minutes of class time or are assigned as brief, out-of-class assignments.

“Writing in the disciplines”: Writing assignments of this sort are designed to introduce or give students practice with the language conventions of a discipline as well as with specific formats typical of a given discipline. For example, the engineering lab report includes much different information in a quite different format from the annual business report.

Definitions from The WAC Clearinghouse
Writing To Learn: Common Examples

• Writing into the Day (what we did with Natural Critical Learning Environments)

• Writing to prepare for a discussion or restart one that has lagged (what we did when you brainstormed problems, issues, concepts)

• Writing to Generate Student Questions (to end class, start class, or to have students write their own exam questions)
Writing to Learn: The One-Minute Paper

With one minute left in class, ask the students to write:
1. the main thing they’ve learned
2. one question they have or issue they don’t quite understand

Collect them and read quickly to see what students have gained
Use the handout to brainstorm at least one concrete writing activity

• Circle, star, or highlight an activity you could use in your class

• Imagine the questions and problems in your field—which question or problem could student grapple with through this kind of writing

• Would this work best as a: formal writing assignment, exploratory writing assignment, small group task, class discussion starter, practice exam questions

• Brainstorm as many ideas as you can
Additional thoughts

• Writing that forces students to “translate” their understandings for a less knowledgeable audience has been found to be very effective in many disciplines

• Some genres force students into “translation” mode
What do you do with this? Some ideas...

NOTE: Not all writing to learn must be collected—students will do many of the writing activities that are embedded into class as part of their normal participation

• Collect free-writes (especially at the end of class) and read quickly (no need to grade or respond) to get a classroom temperature

• Collect learning logs intermittently (1/3 or 1/4 of the class at at at time). Use checkmarks (pluses and minuses) or pull quotes to share with the whole class

• For some activities, have students work in groups to produce single text per group.

• Writing to learn can also be used by students to create a final portfolio of their semester’s learning OR may substitute for another assessment
Learning to Write in the Disciplines

• Each discipline has its own way of writing, based on disciplinary norms and an underlying ontological stance (i.e., is there one objective reality or can multiple realities co-exist?)

• Disciplinary genres reflect disciplinary thinking:
  • What kinds of problems or questions does this discipline explore?
  • How do experts get started on an inquiry?
  • What counts as evidence in this discipline?
  • How is data collected?
  • How is data analyzed or interpreted?
  • How are claims made and justified?
  • What genres are used to communicate claims?
  • What standards are used to judge a claim? (i.e., replicable? Or plausible?)
  • What are common rhetorical moves made by disciplinary experts?
Disciplinary Inquiry Cycle

- Problem Framing
- Working with data
- Consulting multiple sources
- Examining and evaluating claims
- Communicating Claims
- Analyzing, summarizing, and synthesizing findings
Final Thought

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If you are interested in exploring these topics in depth for doctoral credit….

Spring courses in the School of Teaching and Learning:

- **EDG 6931: Teaching Adult Learners** (Dr. Sevan Terzian, Mondays 9-11th periods)
- **EDG 6017: Writing for Academic Purposes** (Dr. Zhihui Fang, Wednesdays 6-8th periods)
Thanks!!

Angela M. Kohnen
Assistant Professor, English Language Arts Education
School of Teaching and Learning

akohnen@coe.ufl.edu