The Writing/Learning Connection

by Diane Boehm
Writing Program Director

Talking about the value of writing to enhance learning is a little like talking about the value of exercise to good health. We've all heard a lot about it, but...

Let's pay a brief visit to XYZ University:

Lecture Hall with History Professor Jones:

"Students, I will get to know you and take attendance by beginning each class with a short write. Today on the 3×5 cards I am passing out, I'd like you to write a question based on the reading assignment. It may be a question about something that wasn't clear to you, or a question that we might use for class discussion next time we meet. I've written two sample questions on the board. Please pass these to the aisle when you've finished writing. We'll take about five minutes for this."

Gymnasium with Basketball Coach Smith:

"Hey, guys, I'm Coach Smith, head basketball coach. As you've seen from the schedule, basketball tryouts will be held every day this week from 3-5. We'll start with some drills. But before we do, there's an assignment I'm going to give you. On Wednesday I want each of you to bring to tryouts a written statement that explains your philosophy of winning and losing. I want to hear what you have to say about this; two pages max. I will be reading these before I make the final cuts."

Study Carrel with Student Green:

"In Educational Psychology we explore course topics through reading, discussion and writing journals. The journals consist of four sections:

1) a daily diary of reactions to the textbook readings

2) topic-assigned written assignments

3) free writes as well as reactions and summaries of group discussions and videos

4) a scrapbook of articles and newspaper clippings to be summarized and reacted to.

I'm learning so much. We go beyond the boundaries of the class to learn, and I have the opportunity to write on many subjects in many ways. This helps me to discover ideas and connect these ideas to the subject being taught."

What do Professor Jones, Coach Smith and Student Green have in common? Each is using writing as a teaching/learning strategy. For varied purposes and in different contexts, each is making the writing/learning connection.

Writing As Learning

Most of us would probably agree: if students can't *explain* a concept or a process or a term, they don't really *understand* it. Explaining in writing, in their own language, helps students to understand—and teachers to know— whether they are being understood.

Writing to learn, in essence then, means "finding out what a student knows about a topic and discovering new connections and new ideas." Through writing, both students and instructors learn and express knowledge in their discipline. Toby Fulwiler, a leader in *Writing Across the Disciplines,* puts it this way: "Writing as an act of cognition can help students to learn, if teachers encourage a variety of writing activities."

Research by Beach and Bridwell and many others demonstrates that writing/learning strategies can help students:

• master new information in subject area classes

• develop problem-solving strategies for organizing both old and new information

• understand writing conventions and audience awareness

• evaluate critically the information they are learning, and

• learn to perceive and analyze their own experiences.

The thought processes that are essential for good writing are central to every discipline and every educational enterprise. Composing is an exercise in thinking, a systematic exploration of an idea or topic; a writer's logic and development reflect the quality of his/her thinking. Writing, then, is more than merely a *product;* it reveals the *process* of a discovering mind. In the words of Steve BeMiller, California State mathematics professor:

"I had been frustrated because I had no way of *seeing* students thinking. I hoped they were, but I couldn't get at the process. What I came to realize was that writing is thinking made visible. It was the tool I had been looking for."

The Writing/Learning Connection

Educators who use writing as a thinking/learning tool often do so for the sake of their students. But as they work together to develop ways to use writing to enhance student learning, they cite many personal benefits: a sense of community among faculty isolated by disciplines; a revitalizing antidote to burnout; new initiatives, such as co-teaching of courses and collaborative presentations at conferences; ongoing discussions of ways to improve teaching; improved curricular coherence; stronger connectedness with students; greater motivation for their own personal and professional writing.

Strategies That Work

How can teachers use writing to enhance learning? The variety of writing/learning strategies available is limited only by the teacher's imagination and the needs of the students in a class. A starting list might include: summaries; correspondence; journals in many variations; lab reports; proposals; critiques; I-search papers; collaborative research; formal and informal debates; learning logs; reflective writing on assignments; case studies; field studies; process analyses; role playing; multi-media presentations; impromptu exercises; short writes to open or end class or to test comprehension of a concept; essay tests; double-entry notetaking (students take lecture notes in one column, then write questions and responses to those notes in the second column). All of these provide a way for students to use their own written language to interact with the concepts being taught.

What about the extra time commitment that might be required to design the writing assignments and read the students' writing?

Coach Smith has decided it isn't enough for his players to be able to shoot accurately and play tough defense; he wants to know how they think, how they will handle game pressures. They will write after games, and again at the end of the season. As they write, they will sort out their philosophy—and he will learn more about the kind of team players they are. That's his pay-off.

History Professor Jones has decided she wants students to be less anonymous; she also wants to know what questions students have. She will use varied "five-minute write" strategies to open class, then invest a half hour to

read them as a way to "test" student understanding and get students involved in the topics of the course. Some student questions will be used for class discussions; others will find their way into her essay tests.

Student Green's Ed Psych teacher is both modeling a strategy that these future teachers could use—and requiring that students think about the kind of teachers they will become. These are essential to his goals for the course.

Three Goals for Writing Assignments

Part of the answer to handling paper loads and responding in a meaningful way to student writing lies in focusing on our goals for assigning writing, or a particular piece of writing.

Teachers who use the writing/learning connection know that not every word written by every student must in fact be read by them, or evaluated. In "A Model for Designing and Revising Assignments," Reiff and Middleton suggest three different goals for writing assignments:

1. **Discovery.** Students write to clarify ideas or feelings, uncover new information, integrate new material, understand a process or relationship, or in some other way generate new learning.

Discovery writing could be used for: large or small group discussion; response by another student; selective reading to the class; invention for later writing assignments; simple pass/fail marking, etc.

2. **Communication.** Students organize and present their ideas appropriately and effectively for specific readers, real or hypothetical.

Communication writing could be used for: oral reports; collaborative assignments; peer response and comparison; contrast with opposing views; self-

evaluation; essay exams; debates; role plays; discussion groups or other group activities, etc.

3. **Performance.** Students write a carefully constructed and revised paper to demonstrate mastery of a skill, concept or body of knowledge.

Performance writing could be used for: graded individual assignments; assignments to be used in a portfolio; collaborative assignments; oral presentations based on the writing; class anthologies, etc.

As students write to learn, they also learn to write. There are no greater gifts we can give our students than the power to think and the power to command language. In the words of a former student, "Writing is everybody's business."

Diane Ravitch, in *The American Reader: Words That Moved A Nation*, sums it up well:

"No matter how powerful the technology of the future, we will still rely on the power of words and ideas. Those who can command them will be enabled to affect the world. Those who cannot will find themselves excluded not only from jobs and opportunities but also from all those experiences that allow us to reflect on the significance of our lives."

* * * *

Writing: Cognitive Act & Learning Strategy will be explored more fully in the August 25 faculty workshop, led by Dr. Patricia Lambert Stock of Michigan State University. Details to follow.

If you are interested in ideas for using writing in your discipline, a large collection of materials, articles, and strategies is available in my office, Wickes 202. Please stop by to peruse the shelves, or fill out and return the form below.

Name _____

Department _____

Campus Address _____

I would like information about _____

_____

Return to Diane Boehm, 202 Wickes Hall

Revisions in the Reading & Study Skills Program at SVSU

by Kerry Segel
Associate Professor of English/Reading

The reading and study skills program has been a mainstay at SVSU for the past two decades. During that time significant changes have occurred in the student body as well as in society at large. Those of us working with the program over the past several years have adapted our instruction and course content and initiated certain program modifications to reflect these changes. However, over the past two years, the program has undergone *substantial* revisions that have important implications for faculty across campus. It is these revisions that I want to describe.

At the program level, there are, as before, three courses, but the program can now be completed in a maximum of two rather than three semesters because English 104 and 104L can be taken concurrently. Other changes in title, hours, and placement are summarized below:

English 082. *Title Change:* from "Intensive Individualized Reading" to "Fundamentals of College Reading and Learning." *Contact Hours:* from four to five hours. *Placement:* prerequisites remain the same; however, this course is now designed for freshmen and sophomores. Students of junior standing or above enter the program in English 104L or English 104.

English 104L. *Title and Numbering Change:* from English 083 "Individualized Reading" to English 104L "Individualized Reading and Vocabulary Development." *Contact Hours:* from the one-lecture, one-lab configuration of English 083 to a three contact-hour lab. *Placement:* this course can now be taken *concurrently* with English 104.

English 104. *Title Change:* from "Reading for Success" to "Strategies for Academic Success." *Placement:* this course remains a two-credit, two-contact-hour course.

What I wish to emphasize, however, are the changes in focus and content. Given the highly varied learning needs of our student population, we have broadened the program to include such topics as time management and goal setting with the more traditional areas of reading comprehension, textbook reading, vocabulary development, and test taking.

More significant, I believe, has been

the practice and application component of the program. For each major strategy, activity, or topic, we require extensive practice in content-area courses. If, for example, you notice students in your biology, political science, psychology, or accounting class switching from a traditional to a "split-page" note taking system, you'll understand why. Effective approaches to textbook reading and tackling homework assignments are other examples of how we are integrating our program with the needs of your courses.

Another important development in the program is what we call *individualization*. Due to the highly varied learning needs and the intensive contact needed with those SVSU students who are "at-risk," we have always set aside two courses in which we spend substantial class time with each student. These courses, with limited enrollments, are English 082 and 104L. The new aspect of this program is that we offer English

104L for any student needing learning support in a particular course or field. We consult with the relevant faculty member on the student's needs and report on his or her progress.

Finally, a word on English 104 "Strategies for Academic Success." As universities across the country struggle with the questions of how to increase academic success among their student populations, we know that at SVSU we have an important part of the answer in place in English 104. This course has met the learning needs of freshmen and juniors and of those struggling with time management and textbook reading. Students have even enrolled in this course to prepare for graduate school. We highly recommend it for any student who wishes to improve his or her learning effectiveness.

English 082, English 104L, English 104—three reasons to let us know what we can do for you.

Political Science Writing

by Bob Lane
Assistant Professor of Political Science

The Political Science Department emphasizes writing throughout its curriculum. Essay exams and papers are standard fare. While the specifics differ, the writing skills I discuss here are integral to every course we teach.

Clarity is key, for as my colleague David Weaver tells his students, "If you're not writing clearly, you're not thinking clearly." To achieve a baseline of clarity, students must write in complete sentences and paragraphs. I remind students that cohesive paragraphs demonstrate organization and understanding.

I expect students to write **analytically.** They must construct reasoned arguments, rather than offer unsubstantiated opinions. This is a challenge, for students often think that I seek their personal beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Instead, I want them to master three related tasks: **description, explanation, and evaluation.** I expect students to describe political events, such as election results. I expect students to explain political events, such as Republicans gaining control of Congress. Finally, I expect students to evaluate political

events, identifying the likely winners and losers of a Republican Congress.

One final writing skill should be noted. Not surprisingly, I want students to apply important concepts. Accordingly, I tell my students that they must be well-informed about the news so that they can connect the news to what we grapple with in the classroom. Proper use of **illustrative examples,** then, demonstrates understanding what I want them to know, rather than reiterating class notes in mirror fashion.

Together, a well-written political science exam or paper demonstrates clarity of both content and organization. It provides reasoned analysis and argument, drawing upon prudent use of illustrative examples. Students have a better chance of meeting them when these expectations are clear.

the SVSU *Literacy* Link