

An Open Letter: Why Should Teachers Become Involved with Writing Across the Curriculum?

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Dear Colleague,

As the unofficial spokesperson for those who work in “the Write Place,” the Burlington Community High School writing/learning center, I am more than happy to share our perceptions and ideas about writing to learn theory and pedagogy. Whether we were truly farsighted or blindly lucky in establishing the center, our exploration of writing to learn activities has been expanding for over a decade, and our views are based on our continuing research, our work in our own classes, our work in and through our writing/learning center, and our work as consultants for other districts. Many of us who developed the plan for our Communication Resource Center in the early eighties had participated in the Iowa Writing Project and had adopted a process approach to writing and learning. One of our primary objectives for the center continues to be that it “become the center for staff exploration, development, implementation, and sharing of writing-to-learn activities” (School Mission Statement). As in many high school centers, we spend most of our time working with students and staff on traditional writing activities, and we believe that these efforts are important. However, we are gaining converts to writing as a powerful learning tool, and more content-area instructors are beginning to use writing to learn strategies. The staff in the center is very proactive; we seek out, encourage, and assist all teachers in the use of both traditional and writing to learn activities.

Those of us who work with writing to learn activities see our efforts as ongoing processes. For example, we have begun investigation into authentic and portfolio assessment, and we believe that these hold great promise as important components in writing to learn activities. We have also become involved in sharing our efforts with other school districts and often make presentations at professional meetings. I do want to make clear that our perceptions and ideas are more practice-based than research-based. While we continue to explore writing to learn theory and pedagogy, we always emphasize to students and staff to do what works, and what works is our most important criterion for evaluating our efforts.

Our work in the area of writing to learn activities has been an “inside-out” effort. Neither our district nor our building has made the large-scale commitment to exploration and implementation of writing to learn activities. Most of our work in this area has been based in our writing/learning center. We have deliberately sought out sympathetic or semi-interested teachers and have worked with them in incorporating more traditional writing activities into their classrooms. Then, we have further encouraged and assisted them in the exploration, development, and implementation of writing to learn activities. This inside-out approach has been most effective in creating truly committed converts; however, such an approach is limited in its immediate large-scale impact. I do work as a consultant for districts that have made the large-scale commitment to writing to learn, so my reflections are based on my classroom, center, and consultant experiences. However, as with all learning activities, I would emphasize that teachers, departments, buildings, or districts must work with what is available and must be committed to what works most efficiently in their specific situation.

I want to make clear, at least from my perspective, what writing to learn is and is not. Just as “cooperative” and “collaborative” learning are often used interchangeably but may mean entirely different concepts, so too “writing to learn” and “writing across the curriculum” (WAC) are often used interchangeably but may mean entirely different concepts. In the broadest sense, WAC includes any type of writing we ask our students to complete, including writing to learn activities. For the sake of clarification, our approach with students and staff is that WAC is most often “writing to show learning.” Such writings are usually summative activities and are formally evaluated to measure what has been learned. In theory, the learning has already occurred and is shown in the written essay exams, research papers, or abstracts. This use of writing may indeed be valuable and justified; however, such assignments often place much emphasis on surface features of the writing (the correctness, external structure, etc.) and do little to engage

the student with the language as a means of learning the content or improving skills.

On the other hand, writing to learn activities are usually formative and are designed to engage students with written language to help them improve content learning and thinking skills. Such writings are the means to involving students in their own discoveries and understanding of the content materials and of their own learning. Writing to learn activities are usually nontraditional and creative, are usually not formally evaluated or graded, are always student-centered rather than content-centered, and are often key components in improving the subsequent writing to show learning. Writing across the curriculum may involve both writing to learn and writing to show learning; what is essential is that a clear distinction among these terms be reached to avoid needless confusion and frustration.

The use of writing to learn activities often triggers a debate over the importance of the quality of written expression, and this issue is important to resolve. The ability to “process” oral and written language clearly and correctly is one of the fundamental goals of education, and all teachers need to provide students with positive experiences to achieve this goal. In both writing to show learning and writing to learn activities, all instructors should encourage and positively respond to clear and effective use of language; however, the primary focus in writing to learn activities must always be on the quality of content learning and thinking skills.

Some Reflections

Absolutely essential in the exploration, implementation, and support of writing to learn theory and pedagogy is the commitment of time and resources. Such endeavors are often massive undertakings, and the commitment to provide adequate resources and time both for initial exploration and development and for ongoing implementation, assessment, sharing, and support must be secured. Our experiences have been that it is most often the lack of time for exploration and especially for follow-up sharing and support that is most crucial in the failure of writing to learn activities at the staff level. The exploration and development of writing to learn activities will inevitably raise other educational issues—for example, authentic and/or portfolio assessment—that also involve much time to explore, develop, implement, assess, and share. We have come to realize that we must give students adequate school time to complete both writing to learn and writing to show learning activities to emphasize our belief in the importance of these, and instructors too must have school time to make writing to learn ventures successful.

The actual exploration of writing to learn theory and pedagogy

should involve as many staff, administrators, board members, students, and citizens as possible and practical. Some negative reaction to any exploration of new educational strategies is inevitable, and no matter how unfounded, unfair, or unrealistic, such criticisms must be dealt with effectively. Prevention is a major key. All members of the educational and social community must become "stakeholders" and have ownership of the exploration, development, implementation, assessment, and sharing of writing to learn activities. Although the value of these activities has been proved repeatedly, just as students in our classes must discover truths for themselves, so too must staff and the community discover the truths about writing to learn for themselves.

Giving all staff members time to explore writing to learn theory and pedagogy will, unfortunately, not make all of them enthusiastic supporters. There will be some who see any discussion or exploration of new methods as a not-so-subtle criticism of their teaching. People will hear: "I've been teaching for twenty years and my students have gone to college and become successful. Why should I change what has been working for twenty years?" The most effective solution to such difficulties lies in the selection of those who are responsible for the exploration, implementation, and follow-up support. The most effective leaders or facilitators of writing to learn activities are those current staff members who become knowledgeable and truly committed to the value of this approach. While zealots are often counterproductive, there must be a core of staff members who will assume leadership roles to provide training to others and assume the responsibility for the ongoing implementation, assessment, and support needed. Such leaders need not be language arts instructors (indeed a concerted effort to involve a wide range of teachers as leaders should be made), but they should be highly knowledgeable about writing to learn theory and pedagogy and/or be willing to become colearners with all other staff and students in this area. The leaders should be brave, patient, and skilled at cooperative/collaborative learning; they will literally become the models for both staff and students.

Just as no teacher can read books or attend a workshop on whole language and become an expert on whole language, so it is with writing to learn strategies. I must admit that I constantly amaze myself at how much I discover I do not know about learning, writing, and students. Our experiences have been that the most effective staff in-services are inductive experiences in which the staff become learners and later are provided with substantial amounts of follow-up time throughout the year for ongoing development, assessment, sharing, and support. The model of the National Writing Project is one of the most effective, but buildings and districts must develop the most effective initial and follow-up structures to meet their own needs.

Depending on the situation, outside consultants can be effective in

exploring writing to learn strategies. If outside consultants are used, they should work with local staff members who will serve as leaders prior to and after the initial training. Involving all staff members in a writing to learn workshop prior to implementation is most effective, and arrangements for the consultants to return for follow-up work should be made in advance. As in teaching, the ultimate goal is to make the staff independent; however, quality consultants can provide effective initial introduction and vital ongoing ideas and support for both the local leaders and the staff.

Convincing staff members to examine writing to learn theory and pedagogy is often frustrating, and the worst approach is for administration to mandate such endeavors. The values of writing to learn activities will be discovered by almost all who become involved; however, some initial "selling" of the approach is often necessary and effective. One important positive approach to induce teachers to consider writing to learn strategies is to emphasize these are to be used *in lieu of* some current teaching activities. All of those involved in the exploration and eventual implementation must understand that such uses of writing are not additions to what they are already attempting to do in their classes. Indeed, attempting to add writing to learn activities guarantees only frustration and failure for staff and students. Substitution is essential.

Some teachers believe that every activity they have students complete is wonderful, but even the use of writing to learn strategies as a matter of variety has some merit. Almost all of us are constantly bombarded with new federal, state, or local mandates; we are expected to do more for increasing numbers of students with fewer resources and less time. The substitution of creative writing to learn activities is literally a welcome relief for many teachers.

Another issue that can be a selling point is that content teachers are not going to be involved in the direct teaching of writing; they will be involved in the use of writing. Writing to learn means determining the student content or thinking outcomes and then developing writing or language activities to help students achieve these. Reading and responding with concern for the learner and the learning are the major instructor characteristics for effective use of writing to learn activities. While we encourage teachers to make positive comments about effective uses of written language in writing to learn activities, the primary emphasis must always be on the quality of learning and thinking shown.

The use of writing to learn activities will demand a new and challenging role for the teachers. Teachers will become literal colearners with their students and will have an opportunity to assume a myriad of challenging roles in cooperative and collaborative activities. Beyond the new excitement in the classroom, the written outcomes of writing

to learn activities will be much more interesting and exciting to read than are most traditional written products.

Communication is a major consideration within and throughout writing to learn endeavors. Many process language arts teachers can recount horror stories of early uses of a process approach to writing instruction when children took papers home that did not have all surface errors marked. Many parents became upset and believed that teachers were not doing their jobs because the errors were not noted. We all learned a valuable lesson; we must keep the public informed of new or innovative educational techniques. This is especially true when students become involved in creative writing to learn assignments and becomes even more necessary if authentic/portfolio assessment is incorporated into writing to learn activities. Most parents want the best for their children and will be supportive if they have adequate information *before* the new technique is implemented.

Those who agree to become local leaders and/or the consultants can develop a list of written resources about learning, writing, and writing to learn for use by staff and community, and the quantity and quality of available resources continues to increase. Those interested should also join the "National Network of Writing Across the Curriculum Programs." This is an NCTE Special Interest Group, like the National Writing Centers Association, and the group has meetings at NCTE and CCCC. There is a directory of schools that have such programs, and the contact person is Christopher Thaiss, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia 22030-4444.

It is also most worthwhile to visit other schools that have some experience in writing to learn strategies. There is great value in seeing and sharing the practical kinds of activities that others have developed. Although we repeatedly emphasize that schools must develop ownership of their own unique materials, forms, and processes for writing to learn activities, the interschool sharing of ideas, materials, and personnel is an excellent investment. We have developed our own list of resources and materials for writing to learn activities, and we are happy to share these with all those interested.

I again want to emphasize the necessity of an effective follow-up sharing and support system. This can be the vital element in the eventual success of writing to learn activities. Although I am biased, at the high school level the multifunctional writing/learning center seems to be the most effective method to provide for this essential follow-up sharing and support system. As a complement to traditional writing activities, a writing/learning center more than justifies its existence; however, such a center is also a most logical and effective center for writing to learn activities. The center can be the clearinghouse for resource materials, can be the center for storing and sharing of developed

materials and approaches, can be the place for formal and informal sharing and support sessions, and is the logical place for students to seek help with their writing to learn assignments. Just as a multifunctional writing/learning center makes coordination of cross-curricular writing to show learning assignments more efficient (having students in history and language arts complete a research project for both classes), using the writing/learning center to coordinate writing to learn activities is also more efficient. The demands of staff and student tutors in such a multifunctional center are much greater, but the benefits for students and staff are enormous. I have been a consultant in districts that have developed coordinating committees, support networks, and other methods to provide the follow-up sharing and support; however, a writing/learning center can readily become a most effective center for such activities.

Enough of the plug for writing centers. The scariest part of writing to learn for most teachers begins after the research and training are completed; they must begin to use these activities with their students. No matter how committed teachers are to writing to learn, this is a combination of Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" and the proverbial patience of Job. For most students, the use of writing to learn activities will be a new and strange phenomenon, and the role of the teacher and the structure of the class must change significantly if the use of these is to be successful.

Most important, the new role for the teacher and new structure for the classroom means a new use of time to model and implement writing to learn activities. Modeling and completing such activities will demand much time early in a course, and it is equally important to provide subsequent, adequate amounts of class time for student work on writing to learn activities. Yes, these activities are to be used in lieu of other learning strategies; however, adequate class time must be provided for introduction, modeling, and ongoing work and for the possible use of authentic and/or portfolio assessments. Just as teachers must develop ownership of the writing to learn theory and pedagogy, students must develop ownership of the activities they are asked to complete. In both cases, the use of school time to underscore the value of these activities is crucial.

In the introduction and initial use, teachers must be honest and admit that these are new activities for them also, and they must immediately begin to establish the trust that is necessary for the writing to learn activities to be successful. The teachers must literally become colearners with students and must be involved in completing many of the writing to learn activities such as large- or small-group work, cooperative/collaborative efforts, or modeling several examples for students. It is also often beneficial to share completed samples of

previous students' work as these become available and to share the completed works of students throughout the course as a means of further modeling and encouragement.

Creating the climate of mutual respect and trust is essential. Students are distrustful of the educational system in general and teachers in particular, and it will take honesty and time to convince them that they are not being set up for some hidden agenda and that writing to learn activities can be enjoyable as well as educational. The attitudes and actions of classroom teachers are crucial in achieving this. The efforts of writing teachers who espouse a process approach but evaluate traditionally are more damaging than those who espouse traditional writing methods and evaluate traditionally. The same principle applies to those who involve students in writing to learn activities and then evaluate the work as product. The responses to work must be learning and thinking based, and teachers must practice what this methodology implies. Misusing writing to learn strategies is worse than not using them at all.

One of the keys to successful completion of writing to learn assignments (and of all assignments) is to make sure that students clearly understand the assessment or evaluation criteria. Many materials we have developed stress this essential understanding, and sharing previously completed samples of successful activities that demonstrate the evaluation criteria is also effective.

We believe that the classroom should also become an extensive resource room. Whether the course is math or science or industrial technology, students seem most engaged and have wider exploration possibilities when instructors make a conscientious effort to provide as many sources of information as possible. These sources need not be limited to print. Instructors can provide in-class access to films and audiotapes as well as lists of local, regional, and national "human resources" who may be able to provide additional information. Computer hookups with the ERIC system or on-line search systems at college or university libraries are also relatively easy and inexpensive to arrange.

We have also discovered that writing to learn activities seem to be most effective if they are coordinated with or complement other learning activities rather than being done in isolation. For example, a study of the issue of slavery as a cause of the Civil War might be tied into some independent or group research about the history of slavery, the abolitionists' movement, John Brown, and other related issues; a role-playing debate between Northern and Southern politicians; and then a writing to learn activity creating a newspaper of the time that includes newspaper stories, editorials, cartoons, want ads, and personal ads. The more students can have experiences with all forms of

communications and the more they can be led to think critically and creatively, the more effective meaning makers they will become and the more successfully they will complete writing to show learning tests.

The more creative the writing to learn activities themselves, the more engaging and effective they become. We have seen students write brilliant biopoems about endangered species; create biographies of composers set to the music they wrote; create insightful “unsent letters” that reveal the personality and conflicts facing historical and fictional characters; create mock debates among historical or literary figures based on the old TV show “Face to Face” (an argument between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., about the effects of each on the civil rights movement); create riveting personal “diaries” of historical or literary characters (the diary entry of Harry Truman after making the decision to drop the atom bomb is heartbreaking); create a heaven or hell so the characters can share their feelings about events they caused but did not live to see used or abused (“Albert Einstein, would you have explored nuclear energy if you knew the dangers it now poses?”); explain a scientific concept for a nonscientific audience (“Explain covalent bonding so that an English teacher could understand it” or “Write a handbook for new players that gives tips on winning at tennis”). The possibilities are limited only by the instructors’ or students’ imaginations. It is also valuable to have students create writing to learn activities for their own work or as a group or class activity for possible completion by others.

I also want to emphasize the value of computers in writing to learn activities. In addition to extending sources of information beyond the classroom, networked computers can facilitate group completion of writing to learn activities and can allow for most effective cooperative and collaborative writing/learning experiences. Beyond this, many computers can create blank forms to add realism to writing to learn activities. Computers can generate blank newspaper formats for completion of newspapers about historical or fictional time periods; letterhead stationery and memos (“Write the memo that President Truman may have written in firing General MacArthur”); or blank “cartoon balloons” so that students can create their own messages for pictures of historical persons or events. Computer technology is no replacement for the active involvement of students with the language, but the technology can add significantly to the quality of the learning experience.

Publishing and sharing writing to learn activities as well as traditional writing tasks is also important. It is not necessary to literally publish books, but having students share orally, displaying completed projects, and having those outside the class view these are all important parts of the positive experiences students should have with all language experiences.

I must admit that I probably lied a little when I implied earlier that writing to learn activities will not mean more work for teachers. The implementation, especially early in a course, will be a “leap of faith” and will require patience until students buy into the use of writing for learning (although students will be far less reluctant than staff). The work, however, will be of a different kind, and the eventual rewards will be most satisfactory for both students and staff. Because a different kind of work will be required (one that often involves interaction with students), the importance of adequate school time to develop, implement, assess, share, and support others is obvious and must be provided.

The exploration and use of authentic and portfolio assessment as these relate to writing to learn and traditional writing tasks creates many exciting implications and possibilities. Those who are beginning to explore writing to learn strategies and those who have already begun to use these strategies should include the study of authentic and portfolio assessment in their research and implementation.

As a way of ending this chapter, I want to share a common occurrence in my in-service work. I am often asked what is the one key element in successfully implementing writing to learn activities, and I used to answer “courage.” However, I now answer “time.” Time to help students improve their educational experiences through writing to learn strategies, time to explore, time to develop, time to implement for both staff and students, time to assess, time to share, and most important, time to support these efforts must be provided. Writing to learn activities will change the role of the teacher, the structure of the classroom, and the experiences of students, but more than that, writing to learn strategies will help change students into active, competent, and confident lifelong learners.