USING THE WRITING CENTER: END-OF-SEMESTER REMINDERS

The semester’s end is not only a busy time for NIU faculty, but also for the tutors in the University Writing Center. In fact, students will discover that they may not be able to get an appointment at all if they simply walk in. Here are some reminders:

- Students should call ahead to get an appointment.
- Cancellations for tutoring sessions do occur, but students may have to wait—without a guarantee.
- Online feedback is not possible at this time of the semester.
- Students should have their assignment instructions in writing, so that tutors can help them determine whether or not they’ve met professor’s expectations.
- Last-minute sessions (especially when a paper is due one or two hours later the same day) will only produce last-minute results.
- Tutors will always do their best to advise, but they cannot copy edit or write the paper for students!

Best Practices: Culling Lessons from an Outreach Project in Professional Development

As we shepherd the fall semester toward its end, we begin thinking of spring. But our concerns about students’ communication skills remain perennial.

Even so, how can we include writing tasks in courses where we feel we don’t have time enough to cover the content? Or in courses where writing assignments seem unsuitable? Or in courses where enrollment is so high that we fear we’d be buried in paper if we assigned writing? Then again, what if we feel we are not knowledgeable enough about teaching writing to assign it in our courses?

Addressing students’ written performance. The faculty at Jefferson High School in Rockford’s District 205 has similar concerns and questions. But the District is urging them to address student writing skills—especially writing skills across the curriculum—in their school improvement plan. Moreover, the faculty know that Illinois state requirements will soon make it mandatory for students to take writing-enriched courses in subject areas other than English. Most urgent, Jefferson is on the Academic Watch List, with No Child Left Behind enforcements looming. Improving students’ writing has become an imperative.

At the same time, a Teacher Quality Enhancement award from the U.S. Department of Education has enabled NIU Colleges to collaborate on a five-year initiative—called Project REAL—to earmark Jefferson as a professional development school (see http://www.projectreal.niu.edu/projectreal/). Faculty requested that Project REAL sponsor a course in writing instruction.

The on-site course, “Teaching Writing in Your Subject Area,” has attracted Jefferson enrollments for two academic years.

Scaffolding. Why might NIU faculty be interested in a course on writing that’s offered to high school faculty? Teachers at Jefferson have made discoveries about writing instruction that all faculty can find pertinent and applicable.

Drawing on the National Writing Project’s acclaimed text, Because Writing Matters, the course emphasizes the teaching technique of “writing to learn.” Faculty design short, easy-to-administer writing prompts that help students understand content in all subject areas. These short prompts may lead up to longer written assignments, but in many cases they don’t have to. Instead, the short writing tasks can “scaffold” student learning in conceptually “linked” steps. Jefferson faculty have put this technique to several uses.

Identifying and remedying learning difficulties. When Spanish teacher Roxana Idzikowski found that about 50% of her students failed a test on some grammatical principles they had just finished studying, she asked students to reread the principles, then explain in writing what they did—or didn’t—understand. She was surprised at how thoroughly and explicitly the students elaborated on their difficulties. Of course, they had compelling reasons to communicate those difficulties to her. She also discovered that their responses showed her how to clear up the confusion that so many were having. When she gave another test, all students passed.

Making connections. History teacher Christina Rizzio designed a series of prompts on class lectures and reading that asked students to spend five to ten minutes on each of the following tasks, which she assigned over a period of two weeks:

- Summarize the origins of Islam
- Design a chart that lists the central ideas of Islam
- Summarize the reasons for the expansion of Islam and its effects on Islamic communities during 600-1500 AD
- Either compare or contrast Islam and Christianity [which the students had studied and written about previously]

The fourth prompt required students to write at greater length—but no more than two pages—and she allowed them to refer to what they’d written for the units on Islam.

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Culling Lessons (cont’d)

and Christianity alike. She had students read each other’s essays and then design posters. She only graded the essays, in which students demonstrated their abilities to synthesize as well as compare and contrast information.

Improving reading comprehension. Reading teacher Chris Buck did a unit on monster stories with students who have problems in basic comprehension. She designed linked prompts that began with questions that required summary and reading for accuracy. Then she asked the students to write a letter to a monster who requested that a companion be created for it. Next, she got students to pair up and write their own monster stories, which they shared with the class. The movement from basic comprehension to writing for publication among their peers has motivated students to demonstrate skills they never acquired with multiple-choice and short-answer quizzes.

Setting patterns for learning. Zoology teacher Nancy Cleburn experimented with her students’ recollections of earlier classes, asking them to describe protozoa and explain why studying such creatures was important. Responses were weak. As students read through their textbook chapter, she asked them to write about the successful adaptations protozoa have made. Later she asked students: (1) to identify a protozoan parasite, (2) to describe how it affected humans, and (3) to advise how to safeguard themselves against it. Finally, Cleburn asked students to look back and revise the responses they’d first given about studying such creatures, explaining again why they thought it was important to do so—this time, in terms of protozoa’s value in the natural environment, their place in the food chain, their roles in chemical balances, and so forth.

This series of prompts added up to a very manageable paper load, because responses were so concise. Students received participation credits rather than grades. Cleburn noted that connecting the final prompt back to the first provided a worthwhile exercise in reflection as well as revision, and she sees such a series of brief tasks as a pattern for helping students process and retain what they learn in other units as well.

Building up to more complex tasks. English teacher Jackie Rudolph has been pleased with results from the short, linked prompts she’s designed to help students write an analysis of a character from The Crucible. First, the students chose a character they thought would be interesting to analyze and explained why. In another lesson, they chose and explained three aspects they wanted to focus on from a list that Rudolph provided (e.g., conflicts, motivation, significant decisions, changes). On another day, the students selected three quotations from the play’s Act I that helped illustrate the aspects they’d chosen. They then proceeded to Act II. The steps eventually built up to completing the character analysis from the material the students generated. Revisions occurred throughout the steps.

Writing for real-world readers. Band director Jay Skoglund has had students in beginning band write about the process of how they learned to play their instruments. The marching band wrote and shared five-minute reviews of their performance at Homecoming. Jazz band did a brief response to his question on how to construct a blues scale.

However, Skoglund has also planned a series of brief prompts that, over several weeks, will require students to help him evaluate and select pieces that are most appropriate for an upcoming concert. He’ll then ask them to collect information they can find about the composers. After that, he plans to provide students with examples of program notes from a local wind ensemble, a symphony orchestra, and a concert band, so the students can see how to compose the band’s own program notes for their own performance.

A transformation of pedagogy. Even though the foregoing examples only graze the surface of how the teachers are applying “writing to learn” techniques, they all agree on one point. As Deb Spears, a special education teacher, puts it: “We aren’t teaching writing so much as we’re teaching students to think.” Skoglund asserts that if teachers use writing “as a way to see the students’ thought processes,” teachers will consider including writing—not as an “add-on,” but as something integral to pedagogy in every subject area.

Math teacher Jim Taulbee, who has become particularly interested in getting students to write about the processes they use in solving algebra problems, observes that he also wants to use writing to help students realize how course content is applicable to their lives—and “not just another hoop to jump through for that doggy treat of a diploma at the end of four, five, or six years. To make this work, I have to rethink how and what I am teaching.” He believes that this is a positive and constructive challenge.

English teacher Lynn Graczyk agrees: “Writing good prompts depends on many different factors—breaking a task down, audience, timing, talking about yourself as a writer, helping students develop a knowledge base, explaining terms, and a classroom’s behavioral context. I know a lot of these ideas already, but making me think about them, sort them out, and use them has been really beneficial for me.”

Institutional follow-up: Teachers as leaders. By now, teachers in nearly every disciplinary department (including physical education) have taken “Teaching Writing in Your Subject Area.” Notably, Jefferson’s principal, Angelina Bua, has, too. Roxana Idzikowski and Deb Spears (who now co-facilitates the course) have prepared a workshop—“What Do We Really Want Writing to Be?” (see http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/, “Workshops”). They have already presented it at a regional gathering and a summer retreat for Project REAL participants. In a May 2006 in-service, the two teachers plan to present the workshop to all Jefferson faculty.

At the May in-service, the faculty who have taken “Teaching Writing” will then break into smaller groups, in their respective disciplinary departments, and discuss how they’ve applied what they learned about teaching students to think with writing. Most will probably share student portfolios that demonstrate the impact of using a series of brief, linked, prompts—accompanied by short monthly pieces in which students sum up and reflect on the learning that their writing-to-learn exercises represent.

The objective of the in-service will be to encourage teachers in each disciplinary department to incorporate meaningful, content-based writing in just one of their classes. If successful, students at all grade levels will experience writing practices in several modes as a natural part of “doing school.” This objective will represent the beginnings of a genuine writing program across the disciplines at Jefferson—where the faculty can then do authentic assessment of students’ writing to learn.

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