

Three Effective Practices for Teaching Writing

Composition scholars have long held that students learn course material more deeply through writing. That is, assigning writing not only teaches students to write, but also helps them learn biology or economics. A large-scale 2015 study set out to see if this core belief about student learning can be demonstrated statistically, or whether it is just the fond view of those already disposed towards teaching writing. “The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Development,” by Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, Robert Gonyea and Charles Paine (*Research in the Teaching of English*, Nov. 2015) used NSSE data and large surveys from the Council of Writing Program Administrators to quantify what writing practices made the most difference to student learning. This significant study is boiled down in an article in *Peer Review* (“[How Writing Contributes to Learning](#)”) and I further summarize it here for Edgewood faculty. Analyzing data from tens of thousands of college students, Anderson et al. come away with a few main ideas we can all think about.

The study confirms that writing is indeed a high-impact practice. However, the quantity of writing assigned is not as important as what kind of writing is assigned, and how the student writing process is structured. That is, the number of pages students were asked to write did not correlate strongly with increased student learning. But a few key practices did show up as important for engaging students and facilitating deep learning:

1) Interactive Writing Process

Some form of feedback in the drafting process proved important to student learning. Interactive processes include a visit to a writing center, meeting with the professor to develop ideas, receiving feedback on a draft, and being required to give feedback to others.

2) Meaning-Making Writing Tasks

This study demonstrated strong effects on student learning when writing tasks were perceived as requiring integrative, critical or original thinking. This might mean analytical or evaluative assignments, arguments requiring evidence and reasoning, explication of numerical or statistical data in writing, or writing in the style or format of a specific field.

3) Clear Writing Expectations

Students benefit most from writing assignments that have clear instructions for what the writer is supposed to do, a sense of the learning goal of the assignment, and a clear explanation of criteria for evaluation.

How Can We Use this Information?

This study confirms much of what writing across the curriculum proponents have long held. It also gives us a strong incentive to look at the three key practices to see where Edgewood can make changes and improvements.

Incorporating an *interactive writing process* may require more time and work on the professor's part. But maybe not, depending on how you already structure assignments. We can look into ways to give effective feedback on drafts. This is a learned skill, and can take much too much time if not structured well.

Edgewood's Writing Center is already set up to give students feedback at any stage in the writing process. Many of us already use some form of peer review in class. Knowing how important this kind of interaction is, we can find ways to work these steps into our scheduling of the writing assignment.

Meaning-making tasks may take the most effort to come to terms with. This seems to be an area ripe for mixed faculty-student discussion groups. It's clear from my work in the Writing Center that students are in most cases trying to do exactly what their professor has asked them to do. Operating in a literal mode, they may completely miss the learning goal of the assignment. Students who struggle to express themselves in writing may seem unready for higher order thinking, and we need to find ways to balance expectations for clarity and correctness with attention to critical thinking. There is not an easy answer here.

Based on work we did at Edgewood in 2010, I have a lot to say about what our students perceive as meaning-making tasks. This also ties into writing assignment design. Often we think we're asking students to do higher-order thinking, but they instead perceive the assignment as a check list. Too much emphasis on mechanics, such as stressing adherence to citation style without discussing why sources are even necessary, can also short circuit our goals for meaning-making.

In terms of *clear expectations*, getting feedback on assignments from colleagues and students can be eye opening. The community of practice Ashley Byock and I led last year ended with an open session on writing assignment design. Edgewood could provide more opportunities for faculty to look at assignments together.

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