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Earlier this week in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s “Do Your Job Better” column, the chair of the political science department at Duke University offered “10 Tips on How to Write Less Badly” (Michael C. Munger, September 6, 2010: <http://chronicle.com/article/10-Tips-on-How-to-Write-Less/124268/?sid=oh&utm_source=oh&utm_medium=en>). Although the column was intended for faculty and administrators and includes many good, practical suggestions, what really struck me was how relevant his advice is for our teaching of undergraduates.

Of the ten tips that Michael Munger offers, seven have to do with the reality that writing requires time and practice, and that in that on-going practice, our ideas evolve – sometimes slowly. Two other tips involve the importance of intrinsic motivation and strategies for developing a “hook” when presenting our ideas to others. The final piece of advice emphasizes the necessity of getting feedback, early and often.

When we think about our students as writers, do we assume that similar conditions apply? Do we structure our courses so that students can truly practice writing about course concepts day in and day out, or do we expect them to write “cold” (as if a runner could suddenly run a marathon or a musician perform in a concert without training and practice?). Do we demonstrate that we value writing in all its complexity by the place we afford it throughout the semester? Do we provide opportunities for the kind of writing that is done in order to generate more ideas? Do we facilitate a process that allows students to practice and learn from their first attempts? Do we allow opportunities for feedback on writing that is done in draft stages? Do we offer the kind of feedback that only we, as the expert in the course topic, can offer?

“Oh easy for her to say, she teaches writing classes!” you’re thinking. But, seriously, what would a course that did more of these things look like? What would be the benefits of such an experience?

Maybe one place to start is to ask why we even assign writing in the first place. I would argue that until we know why we’re asking students to write, we can’t use writing to its fullest potential to enhance student learning. So the first step is to think very strategically about the role that different kinds of writing can serve – in different courses, at different levels in the curriculum, and even at different points in a semester. Assigning writing can mean:

-asking students to convey, clearly and accurately, information that they should know after doing the assigned reading or research.

-making sure that students understand major course concepts or have mastered course learning outcomes.

-measuring how well students can use our discipline’s methods, terminology, and discourse conventions.

-challenging students to produce new knowledge, through application, analysis or reflection.

At different points, and with varying levels of formality, writing can also help students arrive at any of the above points. Informal use of writing in such circumstances (often called “write-to-learn” assignments) is not about relinquishing standards; instead, it’s about seeing students as learners and apprentices. Do students in your major come in to your courses already familiar with the conventions in your discipline, including everything from active or passive voice, documentation formats, and organizational structures? Do they know, for example, how to synthesize key findings of other studies for a literature review section? Do they know accepted ways of formulating an interpretive problem, writing a math proof, or introducing conflicting viewpoints of other scholars? We often take for granted the way these things sound—the way people in our field do these things—because we are immersed in the field and it’s become second nature to us. Part of what our job entails is teaching students these very things. And as Munger’s advice reminds us, it takes practice and feedback.

One of the best examples of informal writing that you can incorporate into your courses right now, without changing your syllabus or grading policy, is the “minute paper” (from Angelo and Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, pp. 148-53; available in the library and my office)

Pass out index cards toward the end of class and ask students to explain one new concept from that day or week (you can ask a specific question or leave it open-ended). Students should not write their names on the cards. You can read these very quickly even in classes with 30-40 students. You get a great sense of how accurately they’ve comprehended the concept and where the problems might be. In the next class, read a few examples of the most accurate ones to help students who were off-base get clarification. Or you can read several that illustrate common errors—which you can then discuss and clarify.

Such informal, ungraded experiences provide you with an invaluable overview of what’s sinking in and what’s not; it also gives students practice in articulating complex concepts in written form. You might then build on this in a short paper, perhaps where you ask them to explain a more in-depth problem or concept to a novice audience. By the time they have to write a more formal paper, students will have a much clearer understanding of the ideas and will not be writing on these issues “cold.”

Here are some additional resources on write-to-learn assignments:

The best, most concrete list I’ve seen, from the University of Delaware:

<http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/faculty/5x8_writing_to_learn_activities.html>

From the Writing Across the Curriculum Clearinghouse:

<http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop5.cfm>