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riting Program Bulletin

September 23, 2008

\*\*Reminder: There are still a few openings in next week’s workshop “Editor, Teacher, Reader? What’s Your Style in Commenting on Student Papers?”

What have studies of faculty comments on student writing revealed about trends and best practices? What effects do our comments really have on student writing? Do we develop a “persona” in our written comments on student papers and does this affect how the comments are received? In this workshop, we’ll examine major responding styles and discuss their purposes and effects. By reviewing examples, faculty can decide what practices and techniques might work best for different situations.

Thursday 10/9, 11:30-12:30 in Bliss 131

Friday 10/10, 11:30-12:30 in Bliss 131

Please click below to register:

<https://jedi.tcnj.edu/webteam/cgi-bin/formgenie/formgenie.pl?form=26262>

This week’s exemplary writing intensive course is IMM 270: Design Perspectives for Interactive Multimedia. While its discipline-specific content may be far removed from what you teach, its design offers a model that nearly any course can productively adopt.

Before describing some of the course’s features, I’d like to focus for a minute on the purpose of any writing intensive course: promoting and enabling deeper learning. While one purpose of the writing intensive curriculum is clearly to help students become more proficient writers, this is not separable from its other—what I would call its inherent—purpose. In fact, I’m going to argue that the two are indistinguishable. In other words, writing is not simply the “vehicle” for ideas; rather, writing requires the thinking necessary to produce the ideas.

For example, in a given course, students may understand the assigned readings, or even understand concepts presented and discussed in class, but being able to **write** about them is different. It involves, among other things, connecting the information to and differentiating it from what they already know. An assigned paper may further ask them to apply it to other areas of knowledge or evaluate it. And, indeed, students may be able to do some of this orally. But being able to do it in writing involves complex cognitive skills, including the ability to explain, support, compare and contrast, break down into parts, and so on. It also requires a much more detailed treatment of the subject: in order to write about these ideas, students must be able to process much more information, make multiple connections, and organize all of this thinking in effective ways. They must also be able to make rhetorical choices in this process, so that they are effectively addressing their audience and establishing their own ethos as writers.

In short, as Janet Emig[[1]](#footnote-2) argued back in 1977, citing Lev Vygotsky’s seminal *Thought and Language*, writing is fundamentally different from talking, both in its “structure and mode of function” (qtd. in Emig 283). It is a technology that requires “formal and systematic instruction,” entails use of both hemispheres of the brain, and is much more deliberate than speech (283-85). More specifically, writing “requires the establishment of systematic connections and relationships. Clear writing by definition is that writing which signals without ambiguity the nature of conceptual relationships, whether they be coordinate, subordinate, superordinate, causal, or something other” (287).

This is why we in the field of composition and rhetoric cringe when faculty in other departments assign separate grades for “content” and “writing,” when what they mean is that they will hold students accountable for proper and effective use of the conventions of written discourse, including “standard” (or formal) English grammar, punctuation, word choice (usage), and other “mechanics” including the ability to proofread for typos and other errors. Referring to these elements of a paper as “writing” diminishes the cognitive complexity involved when we write to create meaning, or engage in what Vygotsky called “‘deliberate structuring of the web of meaning’” (qtd. in Emig 286).

In Chris Ault’s course, IMM 270, students are given a series of assignments that progressively enable students to understand new concepts, apply them to new situations, and then write (and write, and write, and then write some more) about their course project. It is the **interplay** among the various assignments that works so well at deepening student learning. So, while the final course product is an interactive multimedia design project, students complete an extensive number of other assignments in order to achieve that: weekly short responses to the readings; a somewhat longer response to an assigned book; periodic activities that ask student to enact or test out concepts from the readings (and a write up as well); a museum exhibit analysis; a written proposal for a project (as well as a presentation of that proposal); a user testing script; a project development blog; the actual interactive multimedia project plus its formal presentation; and a final report.

To illustrate the sequenced nature of these assignments, I’ll explain just a few. First, each student must present a possible project to the class, and from this menu, small groups choose one to design. In their proposal, students must address the following questions, informed by the class readings they’ve already done:

“What perceived need does your project address? Who’s your target audience? What’s out there already? How is your idea an improvement? What specific skills can you bring to this project and who else would you need on your team? How can you accomplish this in one semester?’ Also include a detailed schedule describing the various pieces that would be required for the project — DVD menu graphics, video footage, Actionscript code, storyboards, scripts, etc.”

With its built-in sense of purpose, this proposal requires that students attend to their readers’ conceptual and practical needs; the writer must know and be able to articulate effectively the project’s purpose, essence, and components.

Once each group has selected its project, all of the weekly readings and assignments help them learn and then test out the stages and elements of design. Here are two intertwined assignments that feature writing as a direct method of learning:

1. User Testing Script and Report: using Steve Krug’s *Don’t Make Me Think* as a guide, prepare a script for testing your project with outside users. Include any information necessary to orient the user before testing, background questions to gauge the user’s experience, and the questions you anticipate asking during the test. From the notes you took during user testing, prepare a more formal written report. How did the user respond to the project and to your questions? What was expected? What was a surprise? How will you go about addressing some of the issues raised from the testing process?
2. Project Development Blog: Once your group has decided on a project, document the development process in the form of a blog on the IMM in-house server. Your blog is a window on your workshop, giving your classmates a chance to learn along with you. Each group member should contribute at least one entry per week, describing your contributions as well as any problems you encounter or solutions you develop. Include any images or other materials you create in the course of the development process, such as flowcharts, wireframes, sketches, algorithms, style manuals, etc. You’ll receive regular comments on your blog entries from your instructor and your classmates.

The Blog is the foundation (the first draft, if you will) of the final report which must take into account the feedback offered by the faculty member and classmates. Again, it’s through the writing that students are learning how to design, improve, problem solve, revise, connect, and analyze. The final written report will offer a polished account of this process, and will also be graded based on its clarity, spelling, grammatical correctness, organization, etc. But it is the writing that has gone into this project throughout the course of the semester that embodies what a “writing intensive course” ought to be for our students.

1. “Writing as a Mode of Learning.” *College Composition and Communication* 28 (1977): 122-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)