The Role of Faculty Development Programs in Helping Teachers to Improve Student Learning Through Writing

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This chapter suggests ways in which faculty development programs can improve student learning and foster more effective teaching through writing-to-learn programs and activities.

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In academic environments faced with changing enrollment patterns, increased demands for accountability, declining financial resources, and faculties adversely affected by these and other conditions, faculty development professionals have had to devise ever more versatile ways to improve the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning. In an analysis of a wide variety of faculty development activities in many different institutions—large and small, public and private, well endowed and financially troubled—Eble and McKeachie (1986) found that writing-across-the-curriculum workshops were among the most frequently offered faculty development activities and were rated among the most effective by program directors.

Our experience at the Center For Teaching (CFT), the faculty development office at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, confirms this phenomenon. Workshops and seminars that help faculty to improve student learning through writing are among the best attended and most highly rated of our annual events. Our experience also shows that teaching development programs can work as partners with writing programs to improve teaching and learning.

Linkages Between Writing, Learning, and Faculty Development

Our campus’s Center For Teaching (CFT) and its Writing Program, which from its early years has had a well-developed writing-across-the-curriculum
component, have enjoyed a lasting and creative partnership starting shortly after both had taken shape, in the mid- to late 1980s. In fact, one of the CFT's first projects was a Lilly Teaching Fellows seminar entitled “Using Writing in the Classroom,” conducted by the Writing Program director and a fellow from the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, who demonstrated ways of using writing to enhance learning in large classes. Other offerings followed, as each year the center enlarged the scope of its programming to reflect just how central writing is to the activities of academic life and to respond to faculty requests for support in using writing as a mode of learning in their courses.

In part because of its relationship with the Writing Program, the CFT has thought of the connections between writing and learning as integral to its approaches to faculty development. However, the key in its practice has been to focus on writing as a way of helping students to become more active and self-aware learners and as a way of helping teachers to gain more insight into students’ thinking and learning processes. Thus most of our programming is not built on a view of writing as disciplinary enculturation; this view we feel is more richly conceived and more aptly served by writing programs and by the departments and disciplines themselves than by faculty development organizations. Our premise is a different but complementary view of writing as a mode of knowing, of learning. In this respect, writing-to-learn activities reach beyond disciplinary boundaries to address learning processes themselves and teachers’ roles in those processes.

The critical difference for us, then, has been that rather than helping teachers to enable their students to write like practitioners of a discipline—like historians, nurses, anthropologists, or biologists—we help teachers incorporate into their work with students writing that will help students to learn the content, perspectives, attitudes, modes of thought and inquiry, and ethos of their fields. The focus is on the students and on the learning, rather than on the written artifacts themselves.

**Writing-to-Learn Programs for Faculty**

The rubric writing-to-learn often refers to short ungraded focusing or exploratory exercises that students complete in class, writing to and for themselves “in the interest of collecting their thoughts and getting them down on paper where they can be inspected, extended, connected, organized, and revised” (Erickson and Strommer, 1991, p. 115). However, as the chapters in this volume illustrate, the spectrum of practices and points of view represented by the rubric are actually quite broad. Over time, three categories of activities that reflect this breadth have evolved at the CFT: direct programming whose explicit purpose is to aid faculty and teaching assistants in using writing to help students to learn, programming in which writing-to-learn is embedded in larger focal concepts, and individual or departmental consultations.

**Direct Programming.** The response to the first collaboration with the Writing Program was so strong and positive that the two organizations joined
with the University Writing Committee the following year to present a two-part series for a campuswide audience, “Writing to Learn: Using Writing to Foster Student Learning.” The first session focused on creating writing assignments and the second on responding to students’ writing. The presenters at both sessions represented a variety of disciplines, class sizes, levels, and types of courses. In order to provide participants with a chance to discuss their specific questions and problems, each workshop included small working groups led by teams of faculty presenters and Writing Program personnel.

That year the center also sponsored a workshop to help faculty to write more productively and successfully in their professional lives. This session was based on the popular text *Professors as Writers* (Boice, 1990). A more comprehensive and theoretical view of the connections between writing and learning was offered through a forum entitled “Issues and Conflicts in Writing Across the Curriculum: Directions for the 1990s and Beyond.” The CFT and Writing Program cosponsored this session with a local higher education consortium. This discussion, based on the Public Broadcasting Service’s teleconference featuring national leaders in the field of writing across the curriculum, was facilitated by a multidisciplinary panel of faculty from several colleges and our university.

Subsequent years have produced other, often unique formats as well. “Faculty as Writers,” a four-part writing workshop in which faculty work together on their own professional and scholarly writing, has been offered for three consecutive years and has been consistently oversubscribed. Bringing in their own works-in-progress for review allowed teachers to gain a firsthand perspective on what writing is like for their students and how it relates to the unique features of their own disciplines. Participants have had high praise for the series, citing the value of a supportive writing group in helping them meet individual goals, in providing an interdisciplinary audience, and in influencing teaching as well as scholarship.

Frequently, the actual practices of teachers in different disciplines have been the subjects of workshops. A presentation by faculty in the Departments of Physics and Astronomy, Psychology, and Art, all of whom had participated in their departments’ Junior Year Writing Programs, offered rationales for course design and pedagogy, and discussed the outcomes and rewards of their efforts. Another offering focused on the uses of writing assignments as tools to help students explore conceptual problems and was presented jointly by faculty from the School of Management and the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, Physics and Astronomy, and English, as well as the Writing Program. They demonstrated how writing can be used to generate conceptual thinking, to act as the foundation for collaborative learning groups, and to model problem solving in class.

**Embedded Programming.** While programming aimed overtly at providing teachers with a rationale and strategies for using writing-to-learn will reach those who have an interest in the subject, the principles that underlie these sessions can find their way into more broadly conceived programs as well. For example, the annual Teaching Assistant Orientation offered in cooperation with
the Graduate School and the Provost's Office features a session entitled “Responding to Writing: A Workshop.” This session suggests methods for providing timely, instructive, and efficient responses that are appropriate to the nature of an assignment, and for evaluating fairly. A fall semester TA development seminar, “Evaluating Student Work,” addressed issues of evaluating and grading both objectively scored tests and qualitatively evaluated formats that use writing, such as essay exams, research papers, and journals.

Workshops on active learning, teaching with case study methodology, and multicultural communication in the classroom all have featured short written problem solving in groups. Sessions on cooperative learning and collaborative writing, in particular, emphasized the roles of writing in encouraging students to engage with course material more fully and to take responsibility for their own learning. In none of these sessions was the subject writing itself; rather participants examined their colleagues’ strategies and experienced for themselves how writing can be used to accomplish learning objectives.

Consultations. It is common for us to incorporate recommendations related to writing into individual consultations, because it is such a versatile and adaptable teaching tool. Here is a selection of scenarios that illustrate the range of pedagogical aims that writing can address:

• A professor from the psychology department wanted to better focus student attention on a topic at the start of her large lecture classes. We suggested that at the beginning of each lecture she ask students to write briefly about one of three aspects of the subject: what they knew about the subject, what opinions they held about it, or what their personal experiences with the subject had been. For example, before a lecture on adolescent development, she would ask students to reflect on their own development and describe some personal “markers” of their own entrance into adolescence. Students then shared their experiences in pairs, selected pairs reported themes to the whole class, and the teacher finally collected writings and later graded them with a check or check plus. Beyond focusing student attention in preparation for the lecture, beginning-of-class writing settled down this very large class and helped in assessing attendance—collecting the pieces let the instructor know who was absent that day. More importantly, as they wrote, students were placed in the role of knowers. They inventoried their own knowledge, saw themselves as persons with knowledge, and then were prepared and able to bring this knowledge to the subsequent interaction with the teacher, in which they could connect what they knew with what others knew.

• A professor in a general education science course was concerned about student passivity and inattention. He wanted to break out of the seventy-five-minute lecture routine and more actively involve students. After several experiments, we came up with this strategy: he first divided the lecture into fifteen- to twenty-minute blocks. At the end of each block, he listed one or two questions on the board—for example, “Identify and describe two or three reasons why biotechnology is important for developing countries.” His questions varied from topic to topic, of course, but they often called for an understanding
of a fundamental concept just covered or the making of a connection between
the content and student experience. Students wrote responses and shared them
in pairs, raising questions and identifying issues, and then the class returned
to the lecture format.

• A history professor was discouraged with student preparation for semi-
ear discussion. He developed a reading response sheet that students filled out
at home for each reading assignment and carried into class for discussion. Questions on the response sheets included:

What do you anticipate learning from this reading, just looking at it for the first time?
When did the author write? To what audience? Under what personal/professional circumstances?
What was the author trying to accomplish by writing?
On what topics do you trust the author? On what not at all? Where do you take the author with a grain of salt?
Take any one of the guiding questions for the course from the first page of our course syllabus. How does this reading help answer it?

In our end-of-semester interviews with students, they rated the reading response sheet as one of the most valuable aids to learning in the course. They found that such writing helped them to become “active readers,” to “reflect on and analyze what they were reading,” and to “stimulate class discussion.” Students pointed to the questions that related back to the guiding questions for the course as especially helpful.

• A professor in environmental sciences was concerned that students were not performing well on tests, particularly on material covered in lectures. We introduced her to the minute paper, “a quick and simple way to collect written feedback on student learning” (Angelo and Cross, 1992, p. 148; also see the discussion of freewriting in Chapter Five). She began the practice of handing out index cards at the end of each class, asking students to take two or three minutes to jot down the most important thing they learned during class and what questions remained unanswered. She then collected and reviewed the cards to check on what students understood and where they might have been confused, and summarized and discussed the results at the start of the next class. These minute papers allowed her to quickly check how well her students were learning what she was teaching and whether she needed to make adjustments in content, scheduling, or materials. Also, getting the instructor’s feedback on their minute papers helped students learn how to distinguish major points from details and ensured that students’ questions or concerns would be raised and answered in time to facilitate further learning.

• Discouraged with the outcome of high stakes paper assignments, a humanities professor turned each step of a large assignment into a smaller assignment. For example, in a course on third-world films he asked students to turn in a freewriting idea paper, an outline, a bibliography, and then a first
By making cumulative assignments, he helped students work through the process of composing a long paper more effectively (see Chapter Six).

- The College of Engineering wished to examine both the content and the teaching of the junior-year writing component of their curriculum for undergraduate majors. Personnel from the college, the Writing Program, and the CFT worked together to design evaluations to determine what kinds of writing and instruction were most useful to students as aspiring engineers. This review led to a revision of the junior-year writing program to include more computer-based assignments, more frequent and shorter papers, more rewriting, and more discipline-specific readings and writing projects.

As these examples show, our faculty have found writing-to-learn particularly useful at three key junctures in the learning process. Early in the process, writing can stimulate interest and open avenues for making material personally meaningful as students prepare for lecture, reading, discussion, or performance tasks. Later, it can focus, extend, and challenge students’ thinking as they engage in purposeful inquiry. And throughout the process, it can enable students to reflect on, synthesize, or assess texts, experiences, or their own thinking. Like many chapters in this collection, the kinds of consultations just described embody the “dialectic” that Elbow describes between low and high stakes writing (see Chapter Eleven). The experiences of these faculty also show that writing can be used to learn many things, from the content of texts or the matrices of disciplines to individuals’ personal perspectives and the impact of these perspectives on others.

**Lessons Learned**

Perhaps the core success of writing-to-learn programs rests upon the fact that faculty come to see such activities as helping them to teach more effectively and helping their students to learn. We suggest six general outcomes, based on nearly a decade of experience, that may have value to other campuses.

Writing-to-learn programs provide opportunities for faculty and TAs to develop new teaching skills. Initially, we introduced writing-to-learn activities to our Lilly Teaching Fellows, all of whom were untenured faculty. Many felt uncertain about how to improve their teaching and typically had received little guidance in graduate school or from colleagues about creative and effective approaches to teaching. Writing-to-learn activities directly responded to their need to learn more about teaching. In using writing in the classroom, many fellows reported concrete changes in their teaching: they rewrote syllabi to place more emphasis on writing and to require more of it, both formal and informal, and gained greater confidence that they could work usefully with students’ writing. In addition, they reported that such activities heightened their sensitivity to student differences and helped them listen to students in ways that aided in building a community of learners in the classroom. Based on such positive responses, we then enlisted Writing Program faculty, Lilly Teaching Fellows, and senior faculty mentors to act as presenters at campuswide workshops. In
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this way, we were able to create forums for the exchange of writing-to-learn ideas among faculty across disciplines and career stages.

Writing-to-learn activities affect instructors’ approaches to teaching and learning. Writing-to-learn programs often lead faculty members from discussion of a particular activity to broader discussions of how they actually do their teaching and how their students learn. On our campus, conversations at writing-to-learn programs quickly spilled over into dialogues on larger issues such as student learning styles and the value of alternative teaching methods. When they became aware, for instance, that writing-to-learn techniques could help students to understand course content or prepare for class, instructors began to assign short writing homework that helped students to develop better note-taking strategies and provided a complement to out-of-class reading. When they were persuaded that active learning activities improved student learning, instructors began to break up lectures with short periods of writing in order to focus, challenge, or explore lecture concepts. When they became convinced of the critical importance of practice and review in student learning, instructors began to use such strategies as the minute paper to help students to reflect on what they had learned and to gather prompt feedback on learning outcomes.

Historically in teaching development programs, we have focused more on the act of teaching than on students’ learning, except in discussions of assessment. Yet unlike lectures or class discussions, students’ writing gives us a window into their thought processes as learners. Perhaps another reason why writing-to-learn activities fit so nicely with faculty development is that writing shifts the focus to learning: writing is learning made visible. And once faculty begin to think about students as learners, the road to good teaching is smoother.

Writing-to-learn activities provide a forum for sharing the talent, perspectives, and expertise of instructors from all quarters of the campus. In one of our early campuswide programs, we brought in an outside consultant with expertise in writing. This program was an unqualified success, providing valuable stimulation and insights. At the same time, over the years we have had at least as great success with the use of local talent. The most common—and probably most successful—use of local expertise has been in workshops in which participants not only learn about but actually try out writing-to-learn activities used by colleagues from different disciplines. Faculty members come to see such peers as highly credible; colleagues from across the disciplines bring a sense of authenticity, of being anchored in an individual classroom, to what otherwise might be rather hypothetical advice. Finally, use of local talent encourages the development of teaching skills in an interdisciplinary and collaborative environment and provides some modicum of recognition for the good teachers and good teaching practices that flourish, often unnoticed, across our institutions.

Writing-to-learn activities provide opportunities for professional development in ways that integrate scholarship and teaching. Too often academe sets up a teaching-versus-research dichotomy. Writing-to-learn programs can affirm the natural and positive connections between scholarship and teaching. For example,
as mentioned earlier, we offer an annual “Faculty as Writers” series that has two goals: enabling faculty to be more productive in their own professional and scholarly writing and helping them learn how to use writing more effectively in their courses. This program has been highly successful because it offers help in the kinds of writing that faculty identify as important for their own development as well as for the success of their students. Faculty participants report not only gaining confidence in teaching writing and using it in classes but also gaining confidence in their own writing. By linking the writing of faculty and the writing of students, we are able to help faculty to blend and combine teaching and scholarship in concrete ways, adding to their power as writers and as teachers of writing.

Writing-to-learn activities increase communication about teaching and learning both within and between departments and colleges. Especially at larger institutions, faculty have few links with colleagues in other disciplines that are not based on doing the work of the institution, such as serving on committees. Faculty development activities, and particularly writing workshops and seminars, constitute such a link. These programs offer new and original ideas, provide intellectual stimulation around teaching issues, and create a sense of community that helps to break down the isolation felt by many faculty in their roles as teachers. When we evaluate such sessions on our campus, many faculty report that the most important outcome is the increase in communication, interaction, and collaboration across departmental and disciplinary boundaries, allowing teachers to see some of the multidisciplinary features of good teaching.

Writing-to-learn activities enable faculty to do a better job without a major increase in time spent on correcting and grading papers. Numerous studies of faculty indicate that “not enough time to do . . . work” is a primary stressor throughout the academic career (Boice, 1992; Gmelch, 1993; Sorcinelli and Austin, 1992). Writing-to-learn activities not only foster greater effectiveness in student learning but also permit greater efficiency in teaching. Strategies such as those illustrated by many of the chapters in this sourcebook can give instructors the insight into student thinking and learning that will allow them to offer appropriate support and direction and provide more and better feedback to students without greater expenditure of time.

Writing-to-learn activities promote linkages between writing programs and faculty development programs that are beneficial to both. Writing programs and teaching development programs can work together to improve student learning. Such partnerships can help to build alliances among campus constituencies that might otherwise operate in isolation. Collaborative activities allow writing programs to promote writing as learning, not only as a means to assess what students have learned. They also allow writing programs to counteract the belief, widely held outside of English departments, that the work of writing teachers is teaching grammar, diction, and mechanics.

Beyond guaranteeing successful programming, partnerships with writing programs encourage teaching and faculty development centers to incorporate
writing into all the operations of the center, offering a practical model of writing-to-learn. For example, we do this by gathering written, qualitative feedback on all CFT programs and events and by trying out writing-to-learn activities (for example, freewriting, journals, and minute papers) as part of learning about teaching in all of our programs.

Conclusion

Many faculty development organizations in institutions large and small adhere to a philosophy that holds that “teaching excellence has both general and discipline-specific features . . . that the ways in which academics stimulate inquiry, generate knowledge, and present information are content-driven. At the same time, there are certain general features of good teaching—establishing and communicating clear learning objectives, actively involving students in learning, and evaluating performance in ways that are prompt and that accurately reflect goals—which are common to all disciplines” (Annual Report, 1996, p. 1).

These principles can be seen at work in the earlier chapters of this volume, which reveal how profoundly writing assignments and activities, as well as responses to students’ writing, are part of the intellectual “economy” of higher education. Put simply, writing-to-learn programming in its many forms can open up new opportunities to create linkages, cross boundaries, foster new skills and attitudes, and develop collegial and collaborative environments for teaching and learning on any campus.

References


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