

Teaching Writing: Why we do what we do

A workshop exploring writing pedagogy and why writing well is important to critical thinking

“The Relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students’ level of engagement –whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students’ level of interest in it—is stronger than the relationship between students’ engagement and any other course characteristic...” (Light 2001).

- Good assignments give students opportunities to receive early feedback on their work, encourage meaning-making and clearly explain the instructor’s expectations and purpose.
- Good writing assignments evoke a high level of critical thinking, help students wrestle productively with a course’s big questions, and teach disciplinary ways of seeking, knowing and doing. They can also promote self-reflection and integrated, personally meaningful learning.

Writing and Critical Thinking

John Dewey rooted critical thinking in students’ engagement with a problem that evokes their natural curiosity and stimulates learning and critical thought. According to Meyers (1986), “as far down the scale of life as worms, or even perhaps amoebas, we meet a general alertness of animals, not directed towards any specific satisfaction, but merely exploring what is there: an urge to achieve intellectual control over the situations confronting [them].”

Highly effective teachers confront students with “intriguing, beautiful, or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality” (Bain 2004). For writing involving critical thinking, the question to consider is not only whether the writing is clear; but also, if its interesting, actively engaged with a problem, if it brings something new to readers and if it makes a clear argument.

Task 1. Take a few minutes to write about one writing assignment you were given as a student that challenged you to grapple with a problem and absorbed your attention fully. Consider: What was the course? What was the assignment? Did you tackle all these aspects of critical thinking in the assignment? How did you develop your assignment to make interesting, engaged and new arguments? How did the teacher support you in the process? What about the learning experience made it significant to you? Or, what was your ‘aha!’ moment in the assignment?

Critical Thinking in Disciplines

To grow as critical thinkers, students need to learn how different disciplines use evidence to support arguments. In others words, every discipline has its own method that is used for research, analysis and argument. Helping a

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student identify and understand this method is an important part of disciplinary training and needs reinforcement at every level. When students are proficient in a discipline's method, they are able to grasp an assignment, and tackle its requirements, with greater ease, even as they shift from discipline to discipline in their college careers.

Thus, some disciplines require observation and evidence from natural or cultural phenomena and subject them to quantitative or statistical analysis or qualitative analysis. Writing forms also differ in each discipline, from experimental or executive reports, to ethnographies, design proposals, letters or book reviews.

Task 2. How does your discipline use evidence? What are its methods of research and formats of writing?

Writing as a Process

Much of the thinking promoted by writing occurs during the messy process of revision as the writer's ideas gradually become focused and gain clarity. Unless courses and assignments are structured to promote writing as a process, students will continue to write their papers on the night before they are due, the end 'product' a result of undeveloped and often truncated thinking processes. Courses and assignments need to allow students to adequately confront all available evidence, consider alternative views, examine assumptions and consider the needs of an imagined audience. Promoting exploratory writing and talking and substantive revision is thus crucial to critical thinking writing processes. Promoting such exploration is one of the functions of progressive writing centers, where tutors or consultants can help students understand the demands of an assignment, brainstorm ideas, and revise their papers through multiple drafts. Trying a few new activities at a time, looking for strategies and approaches that fit your discipline and subject matter, that work for your students and are in accord with your own personality and teaching philosophy are key to teaching writing as a critical thinking tool in and across disciplines.ⁱ

Task 3. How can these workshops be of most use to you? What specific issues would you like support for?

ⁱ Most materials in this hand-out are taken from Bean 2011.

References:

- Bain, K. 2004. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bean, John. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Light, R.J. 2001. *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Meyers, C. 1986. *Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Guide for Faculty in All Disciplines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.