Writing-to-Learn Activities

"If writing is assigned purely for evaluative purposes, students will come to see it as a narrow, hoop-jumping task unrelated to learning. Their potential to see writing as a valuable learning tool and a necessary life-long skill will be diminished." –Blummer et. al.

What is Writing-to-Learn?

When we think of incorporating writing into a classroom experience, often we first think of formal **writing-to-communicate assignments**, which demand faculty evaluation and grading time. These are high-stakes writing assignments in which students must clearly and accurately communicate what they have learned.

There is another type of writing we can use in any classroom: **writing-to-learn activities**. This kind of writing is informal, exploratory, and often ungraded. In these low-stakes writing activities, students explore and puzzle through the content of the discipline. The goal in writing-to-learn activities is not necessarily "good" writing that communicates well-formed thoughts. Rather, the goal is to use writing as a tool to explore ideas, discover possibilities, and clarify thoughts.

Some Rationales for Writing-to-Learn Activities

- Can be integrated into any course in any discipline
- Enhances learning by engaging students in the course material
- Allows students to explore and clarify concepts, ideas, procedures, impressions, opinions, etc.
- Promotes critical thinking skills and participation in class discussion
- Familiarizes students with writing for purposes beyond assessment
- Enables students to experience how low-stakes writing can serve *their* needs
- Encourages students to build knowledge en route to more formal assignments
- Does not require faculty evaluation or response

Degrees of Response to Writing-to-Learn Activities

"Students learn more from writing than from our responses to their writing." – Peter Elbow

- *No response* – writing remains uncollected and private
- *Submit to teacher but no response* – teacher reads writing but does not comment
- *Peer response* – writing is shared with peers as a way to generate discussion on course content
- *Teacher response* – teacher provides minimal response such as ok/strong/weak or check/check plus/check minus

Handout Sources

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