Informal Writing Assignments

CCBC – Catonsville

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Informal Writing Assignment Objectives

- The development and use of informal writing assignments
- The use of Scaffolding to shape effective student writing
- The application of critical thinking and creativity in developing informal assignments
- The development and use of rubrics and/or other scoring tools for assessing informal assignments

What is an Informal Writing Assignment?

- "The mere process of writing, is one of the most powerful tools we have for clarifying our own thinking" (Van Allen in Bean, 2001, p. 97-98).

- Expressive Writing (Britton in Bean, 2001, p. 97)
  - Exploratory writing
  - Unstructured writing
  - Personal writing
  - Freewriting
  - Focused freewriting
  - Informal, non-graded writing

- Low-Stakes – minimal points or no points

- Critical thinking

- Reinforces course content

- Helps students practice for larger assignment

- Helps build confidence

Research on Informal Writing

Pros

- Focus on problems & stimulates thoughts
  - Discover new ideas
  - Develop ideas
  - Clarity ideas
- More interesting than essays
- Connect teachers with students
- Can be faster to review than formal writing
- Deepen understanding of discipline content
- Discover writing conflicts or content misunderstandings earlier
- Develop collaborative learning

Cons

- I will have to take home stacks of journals
- It will take up too much of my time
- Students think of it as busywork
- Exploratory writing is junk writing that promotes bad writing habits

Types of Informal Writing Assignments

- Annotated bibliography
- Annotation
- Blogs
- Case study
- Diary/Journal
  - Guided or content specific question
  - Double-Entry (lecture or reading)
- Discussion board
- Email
- Fact Sheets
- Glossary
- Infographs
- I-search
- Letter to the editor
- Newspaper commentary

- Pamphlets
- Peer feedback
- Posters
- Quiz questions
- Scripts or Writing dialogues
  - Interview
  - Opposing viewpoints
- Storyboards
- Summaries
- Tweets
- Website analysis
- Wikis
- Writing at the Beginning of class to probe a subject
- Writing at the end of class to sum up a lecture or discussion

Rubrics for Informal Assignments

- Time on task
- Quality of the thought content
  - Minus   (-)
  - Plus   (+)
  - Check (√)
  - Smaller percentage (10-15)
- Adjusted department or GREATS rubric
- Association for the Assessment for Learning in Higher Education
- http://course1.winona.edu/shatfield/air/rubrics.htm
- University of Hawaii
- http://manoa.hawaii.edu/assessment/resources/rubricbank.htm
- Rubistar
- http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php?screen=NewRubric
- University of Tennessee at Knoxville
- https://writingcenter.utk.edu/for-faculty/grading/

Course Blog for MCOM 151

- https://ccbcjourn01.wordpress.com/
- Students compose 2 paragraphs each week on current events
- Promotes awareness
- Promotes critical thinking
- Due by Sunday each week
- 5 points each

What is Scaffolding?

- "Just as a construction worker on the outside of a building climbs the scaffolding one floor at a time, students need to climb intellectual scaffolds one at a time."

Using a series of smaller assignments to learn the skills or concepts necessary to be successful in a larger assignment

Why Scaffold?

- Helps to break cognitive task into smaller, more manageable tasks

- Lower stakes assignments are not as intimidating

- Helps students practice skills before a major grade that will heavily affect final grade

- Allows for practice and revision

Why Scaffold?

- Allows instructor to see if student understands content
- Helps students to understand the relationship between a series of smaller skills and the larger whole

How can you Scaffold?

- Think of how students can practice skills needed for a larger essay or research paper
- Brainstorming assignments 10 points
- Topic generation assignments 10 points
- Outlining assignments 20 Points
- Rough Draft Assignments 30 Points
- Final Draft 100 Points

Example from Syllabus

- Leads Assignment 1 = 25 points
  - Students practice composing hard news and feature leads
  - Learn the basics of writing leads
  - Learn the difference between styles of leads
  - Demonstrate basic knowledge of newsworthiness
  - Second assignment of term

Sample from Syllabus

- Leads Assignment 2 = 25 points
  - Students must compose 5 different hard news leads
  - One entry must be 3-4 paragraphs long
  - Practice more advanced news writing
  - Practice writing beyond just the first paragraph
  - Builds off knowledge and skills gained from first lead assignment and course material

Sample from Syllabus

- Hard News Assignment = 100 points
  - 400-1000 words
  - Formal assignment that demonstrates knowledge from course and previous smaller assignments
  - Students have said that smaller leads assignments leading up to larger one helps in understanding requirements.

Discuss

- How could you use scaffolding in your class?

- What is a large assignment that students have difficulty with?

- How could you help them improve through the use of scaffolding?

Activity

- Pair up

- Share what you teach and what type of activities you currently do that promote writing and critical thinking.

- Brainstorm 2-3 informal, low-stakes writing assignments that you could both use in your course.

- Explain how the assignment fits into your learning objectives.

- Be ready to share with the group.

Activity

- What types of writing activities do you include in your class?

- What is the most challenging aspect for students when composing a writing assignment? Do mechanics often hinder your comprehension of your students' writing?

- What resources do you provide to your students to assist them with drafting writing assignments?

- Do you change or edit the assignment sheet based on the difficulties that you learn after students have submitted an assignment?

- How would you like to see your students improve their writing?

- What other resources would you like for CCBC to offer to your students to help them with their writing assignments?

Discussion

How do you see writing-intensive practices working in your courses?
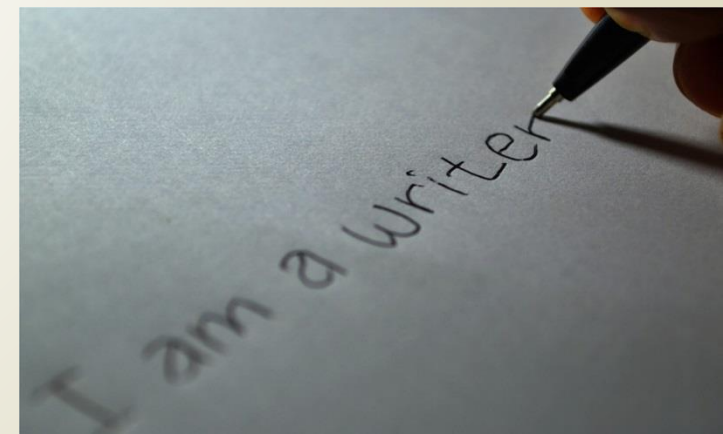
References

- Barkley, E.F., Cross, K.P. & Major, C.H. (2005). *Collaborative learning techinques: A handbook for college faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Bean, J.C. (2001). *Engaging ideas*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.