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A brief guide to using informal writing as a tool for teaching and learning.

What is it for? It is writing to think things through, writing that serves learning and is legitimized by the teacher as part of the learning process rather than a finished product.

To whom is it addressed? You are the audience, as the teacher, but the student is also writing for her own benefit and the writing may be shared with the class.

What is its tone or stance? Informal, not standing on ceremony, direct, candid.

What is its form? Anything you define, but as simple and functional as possible. For example, when asking for this kind of writing I say to students: Skip the intro and conclusion, just make me understand what you're thinking. Length: only as much as necessary to do the job. I would suggest 1-3 typed pages (250-750 words). *Frequency of writing is as important as length.* Informal writing becomes the most helpful when it happens regularly, e.g., every week.

Why assign it?

- To find out what your students are thinking,
- how they are making sense of the materials and problems of the course,
- how they are making sense of what happens in class,
- what they understand,
- what they imagine,
- and what they don't understand.

To help your students be aware *that* they are thinking and *how* they are thinking.

To give them another kind of active role in the process of the course.

To make them more conscious of their own ways of making sense.

To help students feel heard, guided in their learning, to give them an opening to communicate their needs as learners in your course.

To help students understand that their inchoate and unfinished thoughts are in fact the valid substrate of learning.

And, perhaps surprisingly, to help improve students' writing.

How does informal, ungraded writing improve students' writing skills?

It may sound as though nothing about this activity would necessarily improve anyone's writing. I've found, however, that a significant number of students who are not confident about their writing, and not highly skilled, benefit – over time – from doing regular writing without the pressure of constant evaluation, and receiving essentially

positive feedback. They tend to become more confident, more fluent, and gradually more articulate in writing. *The effect doesn't become visible right away; it may take a semester or more.*

What are some ways it can occur?

Students write informally on a regular basis, outside of class, on how they make sense of the reading they do for class, or other experiences that are part of your course, perhaps in response to questions or prompts from you. These writings can become the basis of class discussion.

Students write in class, for a few minutes, on a question the teacher wants to discuss that day. This provides them with access to their own thoughts better formulated than they might be in the midst of discussion. This can also happen as a way of re-focusing a class discussion.

Students write in class, either during it or at the end, short responses to prompts like these:

If you understood so far, summarize the main points in your own words.

If you're confused about something, please say what it is, ask questions that need answering.

What is the most significant thing you learned today?

What question is uppermost in your mind after today's class?

What is the most difficult point in the material we've just covered?

This can be an efficient way of getting feedback about student learning in a lecture course.

How does a teacher respond to it?

Do not correct, do not fix. Don't grade. At most, use check, check-plus, check-minus. You don't ask for a finished product, so you don't treat it like a finished product. Take the writing to be an act of communication. Respond briefly, quickly, in a few sentences at most, to its **content**. Do not try to "teach writing" by marking errors in spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, etc. Don't try to explain or correct everything that may be conceptually mistaken in the writing, either. If there are misunderstandings that you feel you must immediately correct, okay, but focus primarily on what is communicated that is meaningful **or that is trying to be meaningful** in the context of the course. Determinedly strive to convey that this writing is not a covert mode of testing – that you are genuinely trying to find out what and how the student thinks. If you talk back to what the student is thinking and not to what the student is *not* thinking, there is a good chance that you will get a more and more candid picture of that student's ongoing learning (or lack of) in your course.

There will be happy surprises about student learning, and not-so-happy surprises. My position is that it's better to know than not to know.

The goal is to get into a **written dialogue** (student's informal writing/your brief comment) about the student's developing thinking and learning in your course.

Further examples of informal, ungraded, exploratory writing assignments:

Imagine, if you will, that you are asking your student to reflect on

- a hands-on experience
- a book your class is reading
- a research article
- a lecture

Here are some prompts you might give the student to start from:

This stood out for me (in the experience, the article, the lecture) and here's why it did:

Here is what made sense to me:

This made such good sense to me that I have my own further thoughts about it, which are:

What I don't understand here is _____ and here's why I don't get it: [if at all possible, be more specific than "it's completely over my head"]

At first, when I encountered (this situation, this reading), I didn't understand _____, but now I do, and here's how I make sense of it:
[better yet, go on to say how you got from not understanding to understanding]

I thoroughly disagree with:

I wish (the author, the lecturer) had said more about _____ and here's why:

Here is a list of words or phrases I have to look up or otherwise clarify before I can truly understand this:

Going into this situation, my hopes were:

In this situation, I felt the risks were the following:

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(last updated 1/6/06)