Enhancing Dialogic Learning with Low-Stakes Writing Activities

Dr. David S. Hogsette
Director of Writing

High-Stakes vs. Low-Stakes Writing

- High-Stakes Writing
  - Formal, long, structured writing assignments
  - Significant portion of final grade (high stress for students)
  - Heavy grading commitment (high stress for professors)
  - Examples: formal essays, long research papers, essay exams, lab reports, portfolio of assignments
- Low-Stakes Writing
  - Informal, short, less-structured writing assignments
  - Smaller portion of final grade (low stress, encourages student risk taking)
  - Light grading commitment—points for completing (low stress, encourages curricular experimentation)
  - Examples: abstracts, short memos, discussion question answers, brainstorming, paragraph summaries; pro/con lists

Low-Stakes Writing as Active Learning Tool

- Reinforcement of material—aids in student retention of information
- Knowledge building—allows students to demonstrate understanding of concepts
- Application of concepts—relates material to individual perspectives and/or professional and disciplinary contexts
- Independent active learning—encourages student-oriented research or exploration of concepts
- Critical thinking—engages higher order learning (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, persuasion)
- Professional discourse—offers students low-stakes practice writing for a discipline or profession
- High-stakes preparation—allows students opportunity to practice for exams and longer writing assignments

Integrating Low-Stakes Writing

- Homework writing to prepare for class lecture or content presentation
- Pre-class work to prepare for an in-class group activity
- In-class short-answer quizzes to prepare for midterm and final (share and discuss a few examples with the class)
- Post-class summary/abstract of lecture to reinforce key points and to check for comprehension
- Individual in-class writing to prepare for group discussions and/or class discussions
- Practice short answer and essay writing to prep for exams (display a few examples and discuss as a class)

Example from a Tech Writing Class

- Students read chapter in book for homework
- Before class, students write a short memo (using proper memo format) in response to case study scenarios described at the end of the chapter
  - Students bring a print copy and a copy on their computers
- Begin class with group sharing/discussion of individual memos
- Each group chooses best example from group and presents it to the class using computer presentation equipment
- Professor directs discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the example
- End class with prepared short lecture highlighting key points
- Collect the memos and assign points to all who completed it
  - Can have set points for poor, average, excellent effort

Examples Across the Curriculum: Arts and Letters

- Accounting, Biz, Economics, Entrepreneurship
  - Memo, biz letter, or abstract applying a concept to a case study
- Biblical/Religious Studies
  - List of Bible study questions for a passage or theological theme
- Communication Arts
  - Dos and Don'ts list for intercultural communication
- Education
  - List of outcomes in prep for a full lesson plan
- English
  - Abstract of a critical article in prep for class discussion
- History
  - Write a one-page hypothetical (what if the Brits won the war of 1812…)
- Modern Languages
  - Translate a short passage into English and/or vice versa
- Music
  - Write a paragraph defense of progressive metal or hip hop using key principles of music composition
- Philosophy
  - Summarize a complex philosophical concept into a single paragraph or abstract
- Political Science
  - Write a pro-con bullet list for a particular public policy, first from America's perspective and then from a different country's perspective
- Psychology
  - Write a brief psychological profile of your roommate or friend or sibling using key principles of a psychological school of thought
- Sociology
  - Summarize how a particular sociological theory applies to a specific contemporary example

Examples Across the Curriculum: Science, Engineering, and Math

- Biology
  - Write a pro/con list of an EPA policy, from the environmentalist's perspective and then from the perspective of a company affected by the policy
- Chemistry
  - Summarize, explain, and illustrate a complex chemical reaction so that the average person can understand
- Computer Science
  - Write a paragraph clearly explaining how a section of code is functioning within a program you wrote
- Electrical and Computer Engineering
  - Write a paragraph summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of a certain circuit design for a given consumer product context
- Exercise Science
  - Summarize an article differentiating static and ballistic stretching and then discuss how to use both forms of stretching within a given sport
- Mathematics
  - Write a paragraph summarizing and integrating three different research sources explaining how introducing the zero affected mathematics
- Mechanical Engineering
  - Write a short memo explaining why a certain suspension system is best suited for a particular vehicle
- Physics
  - Write a pro/con list of the cosmic rebound theory, first from the perspective of an atheist and then from that of a theist