
Time to Write

Letters and Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

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Writing Lots of Philosophy in a Large Lecture (Without Killing the Lecturer)

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Several years ago I took the dean's \$100 bait and attended a workshop on "Writing Across the Curriculum." My expectations were not high. "Writing Across the Curriculum" was unfamiliar jargon suggesting some sort of graffiti, and I was skeptical that writing teachers would have anything to tell me about how to teach students to write lucid philosophy essays. I was pleasantly surprised, because the ideas Brad Hughes and company offered were very helpful.

In particular they provided me with a way out of a dilemma. I regularly teach a contemporary moral issues course with about 100 students attending and one teaching assistant who is expected to grade all their work. Although the size of this course makes it difficult to assign and evaluate student writing, I think that philosophy absolutely demands lots of writing. There are students, I'm sure, who can think through problems in patient detail without putting pen to paper. But I haven't met any yet.

In my experience, thinking and writing are not separable. Most people only begin to come to terms with issues when they write down the arguments. A good philosophy course should require lots of writing from students, but the most I could

expect of my teaching assistants was that they grade an introductory essay, a term paper, and an essay examination. Even that much written work required my help. It appeared that there were simply not enough resources to teach the course the way it ought to be taught.

Informal writing assignments provided a way out of this impasse. What I decided to do was to require of the students, in addition to the work that the TA and I graded, a number of informal writing assign-

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ments. These are not graded, and I only read about one in five of them, although I glance over all of them to make sure that the students have done what was required.

If the students hand in all but one of the informal writing assignments on time, then they get an A on the assignments, which count for 10% of the semester grade. If they complete fewer of the assignments, or fail to get the assignments in on

time, or fail to do what was assigned, then they receive a lower homework grade. About 90 of the 100 students in the course typically get an A on their informal writing assignments.

I distinguish sharply between the formal and informal writing assignments, and indeed nowadays I call the informal writing assignments simply "homework." I use these assignments for a number of purposes, but the most important is to provide a context in which students can formulate arguments for positions on the issues with which the course is concerned.

For example, in some instances I ask students to write down their initial view on whether abortions or affirmative action should be legal. I ask them to present carefully what they take their argument to be and to consider how someone who disagrees with them might criticize their argument. I glance over the papers (the TA has more than enough else to do) and read a selection of those that are legible or

(continued on page 2)

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In This Issue
.....

- On the Front Lines of History 101: A
• TA Perspective..... 3
 - Looking for a book that can answer
• your questions about teaching
• writing?..... 4
-

Writing Lots of Philosophy in a Large Lecture (cont'd)

that catch my interest. When possible I'll scribble a few remarks or questions, and sometimes I'll incorporate thoughts from the homework assignments into the lectures. In addition to asking the students to express their initial views, I'll ask them to react to particular arguments in the readings, or to say how their views have changed or deepened.

There are 8 to 10 of these homework assignments each semester, and in most cases the assignments can be completed in less than an hour, so the burden on the students is not too great. The assignments help me to keep track of what the students are thinking and they help to make them more active learners. I have the impression that the level of work the students do on the examinations and formal papers has improved since I've instituted the informal writing, but I've done no systematic evaluation of the results. Although there are occasional complaints about the work load, students also remark on their evaluations that they find the homework valuable.

Informal writing does not substitute for formal writing, and the problem remains of how to get the students to put a lot of effort into polished essays without requiring an impossible amount of work from the TA and me. This semester I've adapted another idea from the writing workshop, which did not work very well. In groups of three, students exchanged and criticized their rough drafts. For the first paper, the groups meet with the TA or with me to exchange comments and suggestions. The hope was that the peer review system would be valuable both for authors and reviewers and that the system would engage the students and lead them to put more thought and effort into their writing.

The first paper was a fiasco. In that paper I asked the students to analyze and to assess the following argument from Judge Sorkow's opinion in the famous "Baby-M" case:

[A]t birth, mother and father have equal rights to the child absent any other agreement. The biological father pays the surrogate for her willingness to be impregnated and carry his child to term. At birth, the father does not purchase the child. It is his own biological genetically related child. He cannot purchase what is already his.

Sorkow makes this argument in an attempt to reply to the objection that surrogate motherhood arrangements threaten human dignity, because babies (or, more accurately, rearing rights) are exchanged for money.

This is obviously a confusing argument, and analyzing it is very difficult. Students must, for example, figure out that the conclusion is the third of the five sentences and that the second sentence is irrelevant to the argument unless one adds the word "only"—in which case it becomes nearly a restatement of the conclusion.

My habit has been to make difficult assignments like this one and to let students flail about and learn from their struggles. Whatever the virtues and vices of such a pedagogical strategy, it was a disaster when linked to system of peer review. Only a small number of students made any serious attempt to untangle the argument. Many simply commented on the truth or falsity of each sentence separately. A large number misread the first statement as a claim about the consequences of agreements, and almost everyone overlooked the possible ambiguities in the phrase "his child."

Because of the difficulty students had with the assignment, the substantive comments and advice contained in the peer reviews were almost completely wrong! This was discouraging and frustrating for the students. It undermined the process and perversely legitimized the mistakes. I'm sure many students were thinking, "Why should I bother making suggestions to others or paying attention to my peers' suggestions? I'd better get the old curmudgeon himself to look at my rough draft so that I'll be sure to give him what he wants. There's nothing truly wrong with what I said anyway, since the other students said similar things. It was just different from what the cantankerous professor wanted."

I think that the people in the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum have some useful tools to offer—the informal writing assignments have worked well. But, as the failure of the peer review system suggests to me, these tools need to be used cautiously and adapted to one's own circumstances and teaching strategies. The people in the WAC Program with whom I've worked, Kirsten Jamsen and the director, Brad Hughes, are easy to approach and eager to help out.

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On the Front Lines of History 101: A TA Perspective

*Ellen Baker and Joe Hall,
History*

During the spring of 1996, we had the opportunity to work with Professor Charles Cohen on one of the first writing-intensive courses offered at the survey level in the history department--History 101. The course followed the format of three lectures and one discussion section per week.

What distinguished this course from other history surveys was the regular presence of writing as part of the learning process: we required three 3-page essays based on the readings and the lectures, and six 1-sentence assignments that asked students to summarize or analyze particular readings in a focused manner.

The most rewarding aspect of the course was that students could rewrite up to two of their essays. Rewriting improved both the students' writing and our relationship with them. Before they could rewrite a paper, students had to schedule a meeting with us within a week of receiving the graded paper. Consequently, the students who came to meet with us were largely self-motivated, although often confused about why they had earned a low grade.

Since the conference was focused on how the student could improve her/his paper, there was little of the whining or confrontation that could otherwise have soured a meeting to discuss grades. In these conferences, we were able to clarify our expectations and to learn more about our students and their thinking processes. Their rewritten papers almost always surpassed the first drafts, and in substantial and heartening ways.

Occasional student peer reviews also helped the students improve their writing skills by breaking down the misconception that writing is an individual, lonely process. We found, however, that the once-a-week discussion sections were inadequate to create and sustain a comfortable atmosphere in which students could get to know each other and feel responsible to one another. Without trust and a sense of community in the classroom, our students had trouble challenging their peers to revise their writing

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significantly. Establishing permanent peer review and discussion groups from the beginning and sustaining them throughout the semester would be one way of building a stronger classroom community.

The frequent writing assignments, both the essays and short summaries, helped us assess what the students were--and weren't--getting out of the class. These assignments often served as the starting point for discussion sections. But, because of their number and their frequency, we had trouble

giving the sentence assignments the attention they deserved. We believe that this assignment will be more effective in the upcoming version of the course; Professor Cohen will grade them himself and use them to determine what the students are gaining from his lectures and the readings. Moreover, he will then be able to intervene directly and early when he sees that many of the students aren't "getting it."

Such a commitment to direct involvement reflects Professor Cohen's desire not only to help his students but also to maintain a reasonable workload for the teaching assistants. We were fortunate to have worked with a professor who conscientiously discussed the workload with us before the semester and adjusted his syllabus to reflect the demanding requirements of this writing-intensive course. The discussion sections were limited to 15 students (shocking for a history course, especially a survey, which typically enrolls 21 students per section), and the essay and short writing assignments were well spaced throughout the semester.

Perhaps even more important, Professor Cohen took on some of the grading when it became clear that we were exceeding our hours. The rewrite policy, which was by far one of the most successful aspects of this course, also brought with it unpredictable and, as it turned out, uneven workloads between the two of us.

We believe that writing-intensive courses, like ours, promote more independent, critical thinking on the part of students, but such a course often leads to greater demands on the instructors. It definitely took us more time to grade several essays instead of a midterm exam, but the rewards for our efforts were also much greater.

NEW ON OUR SHELVES

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Do you ever . . .

Feel like you are drowning under the paper load?

Wish your students wrote more thoughtful papers?

Wonder how to encourage your students to think critically?

Want to try new teaching strategies but feel you don't have the time?

If you've answered yes to any of these questions, you'll be interested in **John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*** (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996).

This much-praised new book is written for the "busy professor" in any academic discipline who seeks specific, creative, and concrete strategies to get students more actively engaged with course material.

Whether you are developing a new course from scratch or looking for practical suggestions to improve the activities and assignments in your course, you'll find Bean's book useful and accessible. *Engaging Ideas* is well-indexed, cross-referenced, and written in an engaging, clear style—making it an ideal reference.

Watch for practical excerpts from *Engaging Ideas* in future issues of *Time to Write*. This book is also available at the University Book Store in the "Educational and Teaching Aids" section of General Books on the second floor.

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