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Motivating Students to Read and Write in All Disciplines

Overview

Integrating reading and writing improves student learning in all disciplines because it requires students to become more actively engaged in what they are studying. With this engagement comes greater academic success, and that in turn increases student motivation. Important as they are, reading and writing activities need to be carefully managed. Simply assigning reading is not enough. Students need guidance in HOW to read—guidance that college-level instructors are not always accustomed to providing. Similarly, writing assignments need to be thoughtfully constructed to be effective. This handout describes general considerations that highlight the importance of motivating students to read and write, and it offers strategies that you can use in your courses to integrate reading and writing in all disciplines.

General Considerations

Effective integration of reading and writing in any class begins with helping students build upon what they have already learned from previous courses or other sources of "old" information. Another foundational principle for making reading and writing central in learning is to remind students of their personal investment in what they are learning, particularly as it connects with their long-term professional goals. A related principle emphasizes the idea that academic knowledge has practical use outside the university. Analogies and examples from everyday knowledge can set up a positive social, emotional, and intellectual climate, which can motivate students.

Because both reading and writing are cognitive processes that help students make sense of their worlds, they work best when they are closely connected. Effective reading-writing connections help students synthesize course content and assess new information. To foster effective reading and writing, you should:

- Make sure that students understand how to read efficiently and why they are writing.
- Identify and teach critical and discipline-specific reading and writing skills.
- Allow time and opportunities for practice.
- Provide feedback that fosters further integration of reading and writing.

Integrating Reading and Writing to Improve Students' Critical Literacy

Reading is a way of understanding writing that comes from a different point of view, and it is most beneficial when it allows students to synthesize and evaluate rhetorical strategies and purposes. Writing, likewise, is a way of reproducing processes of synthesis and evaluation for rhetorical purposes. In order to improve students' critical literacy, you can:

- **Provide an Appropriate Level of Challenge:** Students learn best when you set up reasonable yet challenging goals that build on the literacy skills students already possess. One way to begin is to offer models of good discipline-specific writing, explaining what makes the writing effective. Analyzing models and anti-models of effective writing can motivate students to read sources with a critical eye and to perform writing tasks with more confidence.

- **Allow Sufficient Time to Practice:** This means devoting class time to reading/writing activities, not just expecting students to do them outside of the classroom. Some instructors resist using class time for these activities because it can reduce the total amount of material covered, but the emphasis on student reflection that is fostered by integrating reading and writing often yields deeper learning.

- **Evaluate Students' Reading and Writing Practices:** Many low-stakes writing assignments do not need to be graded formally, but student learning will be enhanced when you provide feedback. One way to do this is to model responses for the whole class, explaining how you would read a particular text or passage, and how you would write about it—making sure to explain why such strategies are effective and how they achieve the desired result.

- **Engage in Peer-Review Exercises:** When encouraged to share their work, students can acquire a sense of community linked to reading and writing. You can provide specific guidelines for peer review so that students can reinforce discipline-specific approaches to reading and writing. For more information on peer review, see "Using Peer Review to Improve Student Writing."

In Practice

In this section, we focus on activities and exercises that you can use in your courses to motivate students so that they can integrate reading and writing practices. These strategies have been collected from several sources, and they can be applied to all disciplines. For further information on these resources, see the references at the end of this document.

Strategy 1: "Read-to-Learn" and "Write-to-Learn" Exercises

You can engage students in exercises that use writing to improve reading and exercises that use writing to help students shape their ideas.

- **Ask students to write in their texts:** Students are too often passive readers. If they are instructed to write notes in the margins of their books—where they can challenge new notions or ask questions—the reading process becomes far more active. Furthermore, when writing in the margins, students find that there is "room" on the page for their conversations—a visual reminder that all texts are part of an ongoing discussion and are not the last word on a given subject.

- **Require students to write short response papers:** You might allow these brief writing exercises to be connected to one particular passage in the text (of the students' choosing). Short response papers not only encourage students to write their way towards a more complete understanding of the texts, they can also serve as the basis for more productive class discussions.

- **Assign discovery drafts:** Though it helps if you can provide some degree of focus, discovery drafts are essentially "free-writing" exercises, in which students sit down at the computer and allow themselves to "think out loud" on a particular topic. Discovery drafts are especially useful if students are encountering new or challenging ideas. Discovery drafts help students become acquainted with the phrasings and nuances of difficult or unfamiliar material.

- **Assign in-class free-writing assignments:** Present students with a topic (or let them come up with their own) and allot fifteen minutes of class time for free-writing. Then use what students have written to guide the class discussion.

- **Ask students to share their written reactions to the reading:** Students can exchange their "marked-up" texts and notes with other students, so that each can see the kind of active reading the others are doing.

Strategy 2: The Invention Journal

The invention journal is a place where students are free to record in writing their progression in the class. It is also a place where students can express their creativity by establishing connections and generating ideas. The motivating factor in an invention journal is that it is not, per se, part of a specific assignment, but it works as a preparation for other, more structured assignments.

In such a journal, students can:

- Generate ideas for a project or assignment.
- Analyze lines of reasoning and ways of thinking that are important within the project.
- Analyze their audience and their own perception of that audience.
- Record and plan further research.
- Plan for and analyze strategies for completing a project or assignment.
- Record their own personal reactions to the task they are addressing and their progress on the task.
- Begin organizing and composing their projects in the form they will ultimately take.
- Record the feedback received from you and others during peer-critique activities.

Strategy 3: Training Students to Read Like a Writer

You can ask questions to help students read like a writer, i.e. reading to see how something is stylistically and argumentatively constructed so that students can use similar strategies. You can use these questions to start class discussion, and they often serve as a good starting point for modeling strategies. When encouraging students to read like a writer, have them address questions such as these:

- What is the author's purpose for this piece of writing?

- Who is the intended audience?

- How effective is the language the author uses? Is it too formal? Too informal? Perfectly appropriate?

- What kind of evidence does the author use to support his/her claims? Does he/she use statistics? Quotes from famous people? Personal anecdotes or personal stories? Does he/she cite books or articles?

- How appropriate or effective is this evidence? Would a different type of evidence or some combination of evidence be more effective?

- Are there places in the writing that you find confusing? What makes the writing in those places unclear?

- How does the author move from one idea to another in the writing? Are the transitions between ideas effective? How else might he/she have transitioned between ideas?

- What rhetorical techniques does the author use? Are they effective? What would be the advantages and disadvantages if you tried these same techniques in your writing?

Strategy 4: Learning Records

The Learning Record (LR) requires students to gather, organize, analyze, evaluate, and report evidence of their progress and achievement. While it offers a consistent structure for organizing and presenting this evidence, it does not constrain either the contents or the methods by which the evidence is produced. The principles of the LR model include review of diverse forms of information about student learning over time, including samples of student work and students' reflections on what they know and can do.

The process of keeping the LR begins with the student creating a Background Document by establishing the student's learning history from two sources: an *interview* about the student's development conducted by the student with someone who knows the student well (a parent, a teacher, a friend), and the student's *reflection* about his or her development (Part A).

The next step is to gather work samples as ongoing evidence of learning, including tape recordings of performances, drafts of papers, sketches and diagrams, diagnostic test results, quizzes or exams, links to online materials, and other samples of student work.

In the *analysis* portion of the LR (Part B), students interpret this evidence in terms of the course objectives and five dimensions of learning:

- Confidence and independence
- Knowledge and understanding
- Skills and strategies
- The use of prior and emerging experience
- Reflectiveness

In the final section of the LR (Part C), students develop an *evaluation*, comparing the evidence in the LR with grade criteria that you defined. You then respond to the evidence, the analysis, and the student's estimated grade with the final evaluation.

Thus, the LR is well suited to assess collaborative work, creative inquiry, online projects, and other kinds of work that are usually considered difficult to evaluate. It is also well suited for evaluating students who come into the class with different sets of skills and background experience, or physical or learning disabilities.

Strategy 5: The Précis

Challenge students to write an effective précis on an assigned reading or on their own drafts. A *précis* is designed to reflect the structure of a text's argument; it is not just a set of notes on the text's content. Typically a précis has three sections:

Section One: a statement about the text's *focus*. This is the main issue that the text addresses. Students write a concise statement (1-2 sentences) on that focus. Students should not include journalistic commentary, or examples, or evaluations. They should just state the topic of the text.

Section Two: a statement of *logic* and *goal* (the text's *intent*). This statement will introduce a *chart with headings* encompassing the text's data in two parallel columns of notes (usually with page references to the reading).

Challenge students to identify the logic pattern in the text, and then have them articulate that logic in writing. For example, they can be encouraged to complete critical sentences such as these:

"By examining the sources of _____, the author shows the consequences of _____."

"In order to _____, the text correlates the _____ and _____ of _____."

Encourage students to recognize and use verbs that typically indicate logic: compare, contrast, link causally, cause, follow from, etc.

After recording their ideas on logic patterns, students write two column headings to create classes of information that the author systematically correlates with each other. Under these headings, students can add three or four examples that illustrate the logic pattern.

Section Three: a paragraph (about 3 sentences) indicating the *implications* of the information pattern. This is not a description of the information pattern or focus, but rather an extension of the covert statement implied by the information and pattern. That is, what is this text good for? In setting the argument up this way, what is being asserted, hidden, or brushed aside? What is new or old-fashioned about the correlations made? Who would profit most by this arrangement?

Strategy 6: Reading and Writing in the Classroom

One strategy to accumulate practice in reading and writing is to create at least one writing assignment at the beginning of the term in which students are asked to analyze—in groups and in class through guided discussion—how an argument in the specific subject area is constructed. Then, you can use what students have written to further class discussion.

A modified version of this strategy, if your course includes lectures, is to ask students to write notes during the lecture. Taking notes might sound like a given, but many students do not know how to take effective notes, or they take notes that do not reflect the argument of the lecture. After a lecture, it would be beneficial to organize a group activity in which students share notes. You can spend some class time going through examples of class notes, explaining why some note taking is effective and suggesting improvements where needed.

Resources

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