for your consideration

Professor Erika Lindemann on "Writing to Learn"

April 1989

In the 1986 report to the UNC Faculty Council, the Ad Hoc Committee on Writing Across the Curriculum asserted the importance of writing as a way of learning:

> "Writing is at the heart of the educational experience. The complex process of writing compels us to analyze, to organize, and to articulate, to think logically and clearly and to come to a better understanding of our subject through an attempt to explain or present it. Not only does practice in writing improve the precision of our manner of expression, but the process of writing can lead to an increased precision in our ideas and concepts.
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> Cognitive psychologists have recently devoted much attention to the close relationship between writing and thinking. They suggest that the writing process regularly involves the types of cognition generally labelled 'thinking': discrimination, classification, specification, generalization, hypothesis formation and testing. In many cases, writing is not merely an aid to thinking: writing is thinking. The Committee regards this as an extremely important point: writing in courses in all disciplines has as its primary goal not the improvement of writing per se, but rather the improvement of the learning process."

During the past year, since the Center for Teaching and Learning began this series of newsletters on teaching, a number of instructors have asked for suggestions and techniques for developing writing assignments for courses. We asked Erika Lindemann, Professor of English and Director of Undergraduate Writing Programs at UNC, to share her ideas on how instructors in various disciplines can use writing to help students learn the course materials and understand the concepts of a course. This issue of For your consideration is based on an interview with Professor Lindemann.

What is meant by the phrase "writing to learn"?

LINDEMANN: Like reading, writing is a way of learning. "Writing to learn" helps students make sense of what a course teaches. By "writing," many teachers assume we are talking about full-blown term papers that students work on for the whole semester. And this paper has to be graded with errors circled in red. That's not what I mean by writing. By "writing to learn," I mean short, often ungraded writing exercises that help students think on paper about what a course teaches. They don't always need to be corrected or graded.

What types of short "writing to learn" exercises might be useful in the disciplines?

LINDEMANN: A very common kind of assignment involves writing paragraphs for different purposes. Again, they are not tests. Rather, they allow a teacher to understand if the student is understanding the concepts. Here are some examples:

1. Have students write a paragraph that

   - defines a concept you're teaching;
   - applies a principle to the students' experience;
   - compares what is being taught now to what was taught a few weeks ago so that students must make connections, synthesize or analyze material;
   - summarizes today's lecture or last night's reading assignment;
   - translates a scientific or mathematical formula into a word problem; or
   - responds to a painting, a piece of music, or a campus cultural event.

2. In math or science, having the student write out the steps he/she took to solve a problem or perform an experiment tells an instructor where and what kinds of difficulties the students encountered.

3. Ask students to prepare the reading assignment for class by writing out two or three questions that the reading addresses or several statements that represent "leading ideas" in the reading. Students need to know why they are reading an assignment, what they are reading for. Writing helps students prepare readings and promotes better class discussion.

4. A journal or reading notebook, developed throughout the semester, can help students summarize, respond to, compare, or analyze reading assignments.

5. Five minutes before the end of class, ask students to write a paragraph that summarizes the main points of the lecture. Then ask three or four people to read their paragraphs. Such writing improves note taking and listening skills. The instructor can respond to problems immediately, reviewing points students did or did not grasp.

I think if I were a teacher in another discipline, I would ask myself two questions. First, what do I want my students to learn? And second, how can writing assist that learning? In grappling with those two questions, you could come up with more activities than my list includes.

Writing before or during, or at the end of class helps students translate what they must learn into their own language. They must make their own knowledge, must make it interesting. The more experience students have using the written word as a way of thinking through the discipline and mastering the course, the better they get at it.

Grading papers

How does an instructor, especially an instructor in a large class, read and grade a number of assignments even if they are short writing assignments?

LINDEMANN: Many teachers say, "Well, my class is too large. I can't have my students do any writing." That isn't an acceptable excuse. Particularly because a class is large, students have all the more need to discover for themselves what the material means because they don't have the one-on-one contact with the teacher that students in smaller classes enjoy. Writing is especially useful in large classes because students must assume more responsibility for working out the course material on their own. Writing deserves a response, but grades are not always the best response. Here are a few techniques for responding to students' writings:

- Give oral responses in class. If you had students summarize the main points of the lecture, you can ask five or six students to read their summaries aloud and say something like, "Good, you hit the three points." or "No, you missed the third point."
- Let students respond to each other's writing. Have them read each other's drafts and offer suggestions on a specific set of standards. Students benefit from reading each other's work because they are learning the standards of criticism and self-analysis that can help them improve their own writing.
- Respond to papers in conferences. Sometimes talking is much more efficient than spending time writing comments students read only quickly, if at all.
- Take up short, ungraded assignments for a daily check. You don't have to correct the commas or the misspelled words. You can just skim these papers to see if students

understood the main points. You can also take attendance from the papers.

- Students can work together on group writing projects. Get the class organized into groups. Instead of grading a hundred longer papers, you may grade only thirty because the students are writing in groups. Students divide up the work, write sections of the paper, and everybody in the group gets whatever grade the paper gets. In most disciplines, as a matter of fact, professionals write collaboratively.

- Grade the whole and not the parts. You can set up a system such that "quantity" gets graded at the end of the semester. For example, with reading notebooks, you don't write many comments and you don't grade every entry. A whole reading notebook of 30 entries can equal 10% of the final grade; 10 one-paragraph assignments can comprise whatever percentage you set for class participation.

When faculty members realize they have permission to look at writing this way, when they can be convinced that students can write without overwhelming teachers with papers, then they are willing to use more writing in class.

Longer assignments

Do you have any suggestions for how instructors can help students with longer writing assignments such as term papers?

Should instructors also view these longer writing assignments as a process as well as an end product?

LINDEMANN: Some faculty members are very dismayed when they see misspelled words and comma faults. But that's not what bothers most of them. Most faculty members are bothered by faulty lines of reasoning, the lack of examples or support, by poor organization. Students are unpracticed in translating thinking into written form. So practice helps. A mistake I think teachers often make is that they don't think about what writers need to do when they write. We don't just sit down and whip out the first draft that is a perfect draft. We mull a writing problem over for several days. We scratch out some notes and outline our ideas in some way. So it's a mistake to throw a long writing assignment at the class and a due date and then do nothing in between. Writing has to be approached in stages.

The content of a term paper is often weak because it represents a first draft. It wasn't taken through the process whereby students discover the meat of what they want to say and the evidence for it. Teachers can make sure students don't do papers too quickly by putting things into steps.

1. Write out the assignment explaining not only what to do but how to do it, what recommended procedures to follow. Whenever possible, allow students to choose topics that matter to them.
2. Give students a chance to explain their plans for the paper. Students can write a brief proposal or abstract for you, discuss their plans with you in a conference, or talk to other students during a fifteen-minute in-class "planning workshop." The purpose of such work is to encourage thoughtful pre-writing, careful decisions about what to say, and adequate support for their arguments.
3. Provide some time for class discussion of the project. Present possible strategies for completing the assignment; offer students the chance to raise questions; discuss a sample student paper, noting both its strengths and weaknesses. Class discussion helps students know what criteria matter most to you and how to address the assignment.
4. Support revision by collecting and commenting on drafts. At the least, devote some classtime to letting students give each other help on drafts. Guide such draft workshops with four or five questions you expect students to address. Some teachers collect drafts and scratchwork together with the final paper, not to grade it, but to insure that students plan and revise their work. If commenting on entire drafts is impractical, let students critique the introduction or some significant portion of the draft.
5. If long papers seem troublesome for both you and your students, consider replacing the "term paper" with several shorter research projects. Students may gain even more practice with writing and research than they would by jumping a major hurdle only once.

It also makes much more sense for instructors to comment on drafts of longer papers, not the final version. Teachers comment on student writing to justify the grade, but students find comments more helpful when they serve to guide revision. So comment on drafts, then just grade the final version.

How do you comment on papers students write in your classes?

LINDEMANN: For every paper a student of mine turns in, they must answer two questions:

- What do you think is best about this paper?
- What would you like my help with in the comments?

Often, the second question, "What do you want my help with," allows me to focus my comments on what they have set as an agenda for themselves and very often they are right: the organization did need commenting on. Often, they are also right about what they liked best about the paper, and so I can comment on the strengths as well. Self-evaluation is necessary to help students understand what's good about their writing. Many students don't think anything is good about it because for so many years they've only been told what's wrong.

How do you respond to the criticism from instructors that students should learn to write in English 1?

LINDEMANN: I sometimes get calls from faculty members who are absolutely irate. "I've got this student in my class who can't write. What happened? What did you teach these people in English 1?" Well, writing skills atrophy very quickly. Students may have done very well in English 1 or 2, but if they write very little between their freshman and senior years, they're back in the tenth grade by the time they graduate. Writing skills have to be practiced and reinforced if they're to get better. And some students choose courses where little writing is required.

Do you have any data on how frequently writing is required in courses at UNC?

LINDEMANN: The Ad Hoc Committee on Writing Across the Curriculum did an informal study of this issue. Here is what they found out:

> "Outside the English Department, students are often, but by no means always, asked to write as a part of their course work. One of our subcommittees surveyed a random sample of 400 undergraduates and found that about 20% of our students have writing assignments of three pages or more in "most" of their courses, and another 25% have such assignments in "about half" of their courses. Just over half our students do writing of three pages or more in only "a few" or "almost none" of their courses outside the English Department. There is also evidence that students write less and less as their college careers continue: of the students surveyed, 80% of the freshman said that at least half of their courses outside the English Department involved the writing of papers of three pages or more, but only 54% of the sophomores, 47% of the juniors and 37% of the seniors said that they had been asked to write such papers in half or more of all their courses.
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> Many of our faculty feel that writing is of exceptional importance: 96% of the respondents to our faculty questionnaire agreed that 'the improvement of students' writing skills should be one of the University's educational priorities,' and that 'the University should do more to improve students' writing skills.'"

Are there special support services for instructors who want to do more with writing in their courses?

LINDEMANN: Any teacher on campus who would like assistance in either developing writing assignments or in rethinking a course to incorporate "writing to learn" can get that assistance by calling me, the Director of Composition, in the English Department. Instructors can also talk with Kimberly Abels, Director of the Writing Center. The staff at the Writing Center will help teachers develop assignments or come to a class and discuss how to tackle a writing project. We're very pleased when a teacher takes a courageous risk in rethinking a course. That's something that the

English Department would like to support.

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Suggested Readings

- Griffin, C. Williams, Ed., New directions in teaching and learning: Teaching writing in all disciplines. No. 12. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tchudi, Stephen N., Teaching writing in the content areas: college level. National Education Society of the United States.

Special Note: An excellent bibliography of journal articles on "writing to learn" in different disciplines is available from Erika Lindemann. It is entitled What Are They Saying About Writing? A Survey of Pedagogical Journals, 1966-87. She also has an extensive library of books on how to use writing in various disciplines.

"Writing can thus play a substantial role in the development of the ability to think critically and clearly, it can play a substantial part in an individual's personal growth, and it is absolutely essential in preparing our students for the world beyond the University."

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