Writing Across the Curriculum
All Teachers Teach Writing

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At some point during our teacher training, all of us studied the various learning theories propounded by educational psychologists—behaviorism, developmental stage theory, cognitive science, information processing, schema theory, and others. And we learned that all these different models of learning, which are otherwise quite contradictory and even antagonistic, agree on one thing: in order for learners to access, comprehend, and retain information, they need to act upon it. “Sit ’n git,” a name we might well give to traditional, presentational schooling, simply doesn’t work. A curriculum in which we merely mention ideas, facts, and concepts has no staying power for students.

One way to ensure that students act upon content is to have them write about it. But, in order to have power, this writing must be in students’ own words—they have to make it their own. Copying down lines or paragraphs just isn’t active enough. And even taking notes while being lectured doesn’t count as taking mental action—just think of how many times you’ve turned yourself into a human transcribing machine, mechanically taking down words without taking in the attached ideas.

So kids need lots of “real” writing across the curriculum. And hence today’s battle cry: “Every teacher a teacher of writing!”

But wait a minute. This past year I have been teaching grade-6 science and social studies in New Mexico. My content area colleagues and I might have a few questions about this bandwagon of writing to learn. First of all, where are we supposed to find the class time to invite students to write extensively about our subjects? After all, there is so much material to be covered, so many facts and concepts to be taught. And, while we are talking about it, we content people were never trained as teachers of writing in the first place. Shouldn’t this be someone else’s job? Maybe the junior teachers? And even if, out of pure goodwill, we decided to find the time and do more writing in our subjects, exactly what are we supposed to do or say or assign?
Just as we find ourselves marinating in all these worries, along comes Shelley Peterson to sort it all out: the why, the what, the when, and the how of content area writing. She understands the lives we are living, knows our jammed schedules, realizes how overstuffed the curriculum is, honours the constraints we live with—and then she makes it looks easy to infuse our teaching with smart, engaging writing activities that deepen kids’ thinking about the subjects we teach.

With my own class this year, I have been doing many of the same activities Shelley advocates in this book, and so I can testify from immediate experience: this stuff really works. Not only do these content area writing activities deepen kids’ knowledge and retention of information, but they also invite enthusiasm about learning. As I write this in June, my 24 kids have just scattered off to middle schools around the city, bringing with them tools for thinking though writing that I know will serve them well for years to come. Because they have connected to both writing and the subject areas so powerfully, they are not just able to write, but are also eager to do so. They’re not just compliant about learning the required subjects as they move through the grades, but they are also alive with curiosity, with burning questions and emerging specialties in subjects across the curriculum. I know that Jose, Tanya, and Nayetzy will continue to learn and write about animal extinction; that Daniel and Devin will author further pieces about nuclear weapons and the threats they pose to our world. And I know that Ashley, Diego, and Jessica will write more on the scientific topics—and ultimately, careers—they seek.

Dear reader, you have a treat ahead. Shelley is about to surprise you with some of her great ideas, such as:

- today’s kids are the most experienced authors we have ever taught
- you can use poetry to teach math, science, and social studies
- teachers must write in front of their students, demonstrating how we think when we, as proficient adults, compose

And Shelley will guide you all the way along with:

- detailed mini-lessons that show you exactly how to use writing as a tool of teaching and learning all across the curriculum
- ways to help students find content area related writing topics they can really own—and how to find the just-right genres to carry their message
- great examples of real students’ work you can use to prime the pump with your own kids
- smart and practical guidance on using the Internet as a writing resource
- a huge appendix filled with all kind of helpful information: handouts, tools, classroom forms, assessment rubrics and more
- various bibliographies that lead to both student and adult texts that can enrich our knowledge
One especially important feature of Peterson's book is her extensive treatment of what we sometimes call formal or public writing. While many other professional books, including my own, cover the kind of short, spontaneous writing-to-learn strategies that teachers can use to deepen students' engagement before, during, and after lessons (admit slips, exit slips, written conversations, silent discussions, writing breaks, and so on), Shelley also focuses on a family of more lengthy and challenging writing activities that require of students careful planning, deep thinking, and thorough editing, with a wider audience in mind.

This is a book that promises plenty—and delivers extra. Enjoy!

Harvey Daniels
I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.

—Flannery O’Connor (in Murray)

THE VALUE OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Many of you teach it all. You paddle alongside your students down a river of reading, writing, viewing, listening, and speaking, across the lake of Greece, an ancient civilization, through the stream of force and motion, and you consider countless other topics within the grade-level curriculum. Across all these subject areas, you probably find that there is so much for students to learn and so little time in the school day for them to do the learning. The challenge is not in the amount of material that there is to teach—it can be rather exciting, really—but rather in finding a way to accomplish everything within the classroom schedule. Meeting this challenge could take the form of integrating content and skills like writing across subject areas.

Some of you specialize in and teach one subject area to a large number of students. Whether you teach it all or whether you specialize, you probably already know the value of writing in content areas. Yet, with the limited time you have to teach the concepts, writing can seem like an add-on, just one more thing to add to the long list of things you need to achieve in a day. Finding time for students to write is a challenge. And then finding time to assess and grade all the writing is another challenge altogether. You envision the stacks of papers from the hundreds of students you teach each week, and the idea of having students write more can be daunting. This book is intended for those teachers who teach language arts and also for those teachers who are specialists in history, geography, math, science, health, French, and so on. You will find ideas for teaching and assessing writing in content areas, ideas that take into account the challenges of your teaching context and the limits to your time.

WHY IS THIS BOOK IMPORTANT?

In a world where information grows at dazzling rates and is available from a multitude of sources, a person’s ability to make sense of information is an
ever-increasing challenge. To communicate what is learned is important in contemporary life and in what we imagine life might be for our students when they become adults. The importance of writing in content areas is clearly stated in new provincial and state guidelines for school curricula at all levels.

It is my belief, and the point of this book, that we need to make sure that our students learn to communicate through writing, not just in language arts classes but also in content areas. Science, social studies, and health, for example, provide students with real-life questions and ideas to explore. Content area topics also provide students with opportunities to hone the questioning, problem-solving, and organization skills that contribute to good writing.

Students do not have to be in language arts classes to play with the words, rhymes, and rhythms of poetry, or to develop dialogue for a play. They can do all these things while writing about science concepts or historical facts, for example. As students are learning about concepts within content area subjects, they can also be developing as writers. The various content areas can introduce students to genres in writing as they are used in real-life contexts. For example, when students read about how to create a pulley system in their science class, they see how an explanation is written and can use it as a model for their own writing. Students who are learning about municipal government in social studies might communicate that learning by writing letters to the editor of a local newspaper.

I have found that students generally show great enthusiasm for writing brochures, narratives, and poems, whereas completing short-answer and note-taking assignments generate far less interest. Researchers Deborah Brandt and Harvey Graff (2005), who look at workplace literacy skills, tell us that good writing skills are becoming, more than ever before, critically important in a broad range of work environments. Our students’ success in the workplace will depend on being able to gather and synthesize information from a number of sources (such as websites, books, articles, interviews, and CDs) and communicate it to others. By integrating writing instruction into content areas, we can help students develop an attitude that effective writing skills are an important part of many of their daily activities and will be, increasingly so, in their future endeavours.

This book is based on the view that the process of writing helps learners think more deeply about ideas and information that they encounter when reading, listening, viewing, and moving about their worlds, which in turn leads to a fuller understanding of the information, than were they not to write about them. I call this discovery writing. I am referring to the writing of stories, essays, poems, or any whole piece of writing for which students have some control over the format, topic, purpose, and audience. The act of writing helps students make sense of the rolling, backtracking highway of thoughts running through their heads. The written words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs give these thoughts some shape and form. As Flannery O’Connor expresses in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the very act of searching for words and then rubbing them up against each other creates spaces for new understandings to emerge. Janet Emig (1982) explains that, in order to write, students’ thoughts...
have to slow down so that their hands can capture them. Slowing down “allows for surprise, time for the unexpected to intrude and even take over” (p. 112). Discovery and deep thinking rarely happen when students are asked to fill in blanks, copy notes from a blackboard, or provide short answers to questions. Although these types of cryptic writing can be helpful for gathering information that will aid them in composing a more sustained piece of writing later on, they generally do not lend themselves to wild sparks of creativity or deep pools of focused thought. Katie Wood Ray (2001) writes that short answers or learning-log entries are “a piece of cake compared to developing an argument convincingly for an audience” (p. 21); they are not as demanding as the type of writing I call discovery writing.

Exciting new ideas and deeper understandings are not likely to leap out at students if they are given just a few periods in a content area to plan, write, revise, and edit their writing in that area. Rather, writing instruction could begin as a content area unit begins and continue throughout the unit, taking up 15 to 20 minutes of each class throughout the unit. Or it could happen in blocks, when teachers might devote a number of content classes to just writing. Teachers may choose to use the time set aside in language arts classes for writers workshops to work on content area writing. In chapter 2, I address the issue of finding time to dedicate to writing.

When we integrate writing into content areas, there are two main goals—first to reinforce the concepts, and, second to help improve students’ writing abilities. Students write in any subject area and in the process explore their worlds and come to know more about themselves. Through discovery writing, students learn to expand their sense of who they are and learn about all that life has to offer. The time devoted to writing has greater benefits than can be captured in any list of curriculum objectives in any particular subject area.

WHAT TO CONSIDER IN CONTENT AREA WRITING

There are a number of questions to consider when you ask students to do more than simply supply answers to questions in content classes. For example: How much freedom should students have to choose the format, genre, topic, and tone? How much emphasis should be placed on basic writing conventions? What should teachers assess? Each of these questions could generate hours of interesting discussion among educators.

How Much Freedom Should We Allow?

When we start to think about having students write in content areas, many of us recall images from our own school years—writing a report on a particular country in social studies class or writing about an animal in science class, for example. But content area writing can be made so much more interesting than that. Consider, for example, the possibility that students might write on any topic they choose, using whatever genre and tone that they think is appropriate for their topic. Students could use their imaginations to incorporate their own knowledge bases and interests with what they have learned in the unit. The only
constraint would be that students must write about the topic of the particular unit of study. Students could write in any genre they wanted: narrative, non-narrative, poetry, cartoon, for example. They would be free to write in whatever way they found personally meaningful and enjoyable.

Some teachers might argue that students could lose ownership of their writing when they write in content areas; they might become more intent on demonstrating their content area knowledge than of how they are writing. These teachers would be concerned that, if the teacher introduced a content area writing task, students would have less choice in what they wrote about in a writers workshop. Yet, my experience with grade-6 and grade-8 science students shows that students appreciate having some parameters set on their writing. It helps them focus their writing.

The students I observed carrying out discovery writing in Leonora’s grade-8 class thought first about what they wanted to write. In the backs of their minds, they remembered that they had to show what they knew about the science concepts. But, foremost in their minds, just as in a writers’ workshop, the students’ main concerns were making sure that they could fit in all they wanted to say and imagining their audience’s response. In these classes, students no longer struggled to find a topic for their writing as students so often do in open-choice writers workshops. With a well-defined topic already in place, students have a starting point from which to imagine and create. Researchers such as Timothy Lensmire (1994), Margaret Finders (1997), Brett Elizabeth Blake (1997), and myself (Peterson 2003) question how “free” the free-choice writing in open-choice writers workshop really is. In our research, we found that the assumptions and values of the classroom social network sometimes constrain students’ choices of topic. I observed in my research that students try to stay within the parameters of what their peers consider acceptable, and they often write using stereotypical views of gender and social class. I also observed that peers ridiculed the one student who voluntarily decided to go against peer expectations in choosing his or her own topic for writing. In my research, students tended to align their writing with what their peers expected in order to avoid social embarrassment. I believe that the notion of free choice of topic is illusory, in some respects, as all writers are aware of the social consequences that go along with taking perspectives or writing about topics that are outside the mainstream. When teachers create some boundaries for students’ writing choices in content areas, they implicitly give students permission to try something that might go against prevailing assumptions within the peer social network. Peers are not likely to ridicule students who try something new in writing if the student is writing according to expectations set by the teacher.

**How Much Emphasis Should We Place on Basic Writing Conventions?**

Another consideration in content area writing is the degree of attention that teachers should pay to the basic writing conventions of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Many students spend countless hours blogging, emailing, and text messaging. Compared to generations past, students now have much more opportunity to practice writing. And they appear to enjoy this
socially oriented writing. But the problem with these types of electronic communication is that the writing does not follow basic conventions. It is informal, shortened, and contains phonetic spellings of words, symbols with meanings that most teachers do not understand, and sentence structures that follow “technostandards.” Clearly, students nowadays write more than previous generations did, but they write in a different way. I believe that we as teachers need to guide students so that they recognize that the informality of electronic communication is not appropriate in all contexts. The more formal contexts require that they know the basic writing conventions (tone, spelling, grammar, and punctuation). This means that reinforcing appropriate writing conventions is as necessary in science classes as it is in language arts classes. It is important that students get the message that effective communication is important in every part of their world—with their friends and family, and in school.

What Should Teachers Assess?

Should teachers assess their students’ knowledge of the content area or quality of writing? Some teachers might argue against assessing basic writing skills when marking content writing, for fear that it will overshadow students’ understanding of the concepts. They would suggest that students’ grades should reflect their understanding of the concepts, not their writing skills. I believe, however, that it benefits students if teachers pay attention to developing students’ writing skills; it is crucial that students be able to communicate their content knowledge. We need to help students understand that it is not just the learning of ideas that is important but also how they communicate those ideas. The assessment checklists in BLMs 9.2, 9.3, 9.4, and 9.5 are designed to help address this issue. They stress content knowledge demonstrated in the writing, but they also assess features of writing, such as organization, style, and basic conventions.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Several chapters in this book contain mini-lessons, which are designed to help you teach specific concepts and ways of writing. I have used these mini-lessons in various contexts across the grades. You may adapt them to any curriculum topic you teach. I have prepared a number of blackline masters (BLMs), which serve to complement the information in the text. Use them if you plan to teach mini-lessons and to assess your students’ writing. Feel free to photocopy these for use in your classrooms. They are referred to throughout by BLM number and are found at the end of the book.

WORKS CITED


Peterson, S. “Gender Meanings in Grade Eight Students’ Talk about Classroom Narrative Writing.” *Gender and Education* 14.4 (2003), 351–366.