Supporting Students as Writers Within and Beyond the Online Technical and Community College Classroom's Digital Walls

Tweets of no more than 280 characters? #Easy

A catchy post on Instagram? Captioning now! Will post tonight!

Responding to a Discord message? Ready. Click. Send. Emoji optional.

How about a persuasive essay or memorandum that argues in support of a controversial bill addressing an issue of local significance?

This final task, one that mirrors communications commonly required in the workplace, is less simple. It may be downright daunting for thousands of students for whom social media lingo is much more comfortable than critical analysis.

Success stories in higher education often focus on retention, graduation rates, and employment. However, while we (rightly) celebrate graduation rates and job placements, there is concerning data that our graduates, many of whom have stellar records, struggle to communicate through evidenced-based persuasion, research, and the written word.

Although written communication skills are desired by employers and widely recognized as critical to business success, students commonly underestimate the essential role and influence of these skills in their careers.[i] Bruce Nolop of the Wall Street Journal has written about the lack of writing skills across the graduating student population and describes the issue as one of the most significant gaps in terms of workplace readiness.[ii] In a similar manner, George Leef notes that "[p]eople in and out of the academic world have been pointing to a glaring defect in our education system…the failure to teach students to write competently."[iii]

Raising student awareness and properly incentivizing students to work toward improved writing skills are important components of long-term achievement in this context. Now, as millions of students move to online classrooms, success depends even more heavily on written communications. If we accept the so-called "writing on the wall" and acknowledge a need to improve student success in this area, the question becomes one of not why, but how.

Challenges Student Writers Face

Writing expectations often differ across disciplines and sometimes even among instructors. Students, especially those taking classes in multiple disciplines, may receive conflicting information regarding expectations. Additionally, formatting expectations change, often without student (and sometimes even instructor) awareness. Cognitive load can make the task of learning to write in a new discipline challenging even for strong writers. In our fast-paced era of instantaneous electronic communications, information overload, weekly papers, and non-stop deadlines, it is easy to overlook or underestimate the time commitments necessary for pre-writing, editing, reflection, drafting, and revisions. Stretched schedules, stressful news, and associated transitions to new learning environments can compound an already persistent problem.

Curricular change at the college level, including initiatives such as "writing across the curriculum," adds to these difficulties. It is time-consuming, requires administrative support, and is often costly. Thankfully, individual instructors at the classroom level can make a significant impact in a variety of easy-to-implement ways. Our digital classrooms offer excellent opportunities to model strong writing. They can also serve as a repository for helpful resources, foundational tools, and best practices.

As Robert Collier has said, "Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in and day out." For student writing and growth, small instructor-led efforts can translate into larger successes.

Ten Small Efforts and Ideas to Support Student Writing Growth in Your Online Classroom

1. **Provide Action Resources.** If instructors ask students to prepare writing in APA format, they should provide a sample paper representing exemplary APA style, such as linking to the Purdue OWL or the APA Style Blog. Similarly, for disciplines that require MLA formatting, instructors can link to resources such as the Purdue OWL's relevant web pages or MLA support resources. If instructors anticipate students might struggle with the meaning of terms in a complex article, they can post a glossary of terms, links to free online dictionaries, or content-specific flashcards to promote long-term learning and to help support understanding.

2. **Share Exemplars.** Would a professional writer ever submit a piece for publication without reviewing models from prior issues or journals? Probably not. How, then, can we expect students to competently produce, often in a mere seven days' time, concise, persuasive, and cohesive argument essays? Guided examples, written or in video format, can be invaluable aids. Consider asking strong students if you can share their work anonymously as models for students in future terms.

3. **Remind Early, Remind Often, Repeat.** Robert Collier has also said that "constant repetition carries conviction." Relatedly, Zig Ziglar has noted that "repetition is the mother of learning, the father of action, which makes it the architect of accomplishment." Instructors can apply these perspectives in their own classes to reiterate the importance of written communication skills and strategies. For example, at the beginning of a new class, the instructor might remind students to review all submitted work for content and writing, including clarity, grammar, structure, and form. He or she might repeat this message often and in multiple ways, such as announcements, emails, and grading feedback.

4. **Acknowledge and Embrace Challenges.** Some students may incorrectly think of themselves as "bad" writers. Identities are formed early in one's academic career and persist. Instructors can work to challenge and change any fixed or negative mindsets by acknowledging their own writing histories and growth. It's no secret that strong writing is hard work. (This article shares more on that sentiment.) Ernest Hemingway said, "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." (For more of Hemingway's guidance, see Hemingway on Writing. And for a collection of quotes by writers on the difficulties of writing, see this article.) As a role model for your students, share your own struggles with writing. Share your strategies, as well. Mindset and determination to improve can be impacted by shared experiences.

5. **Heighten Awareness and Emphasize Writing as a Skill.** Continue to communicate that writing is a skill that grows with practice over time. This helpful article highlights some of the most common writing errors by students. Work to emphasize the importance and the challenges of writing, especially early on in the term. Reiterate the common errors, and explain how to correct them. After all, starting your twentieth paper is often just as hard as starting your first. And sometimes harder.

6. **Share Personal Experiences.** Did you visit your own college writing centers during your time as a student? Do you wish you had? More presently, what strategies do you use so your own work continues to improve? Students respond positively to honesty and advice. Post links to college and university writing centers, tutoring services, and support resources that students can access.

7. **Offer Evidence That Demonstrates the Value of Hard Work and Effort.** To get physically strong, we lift repetitively. To become adept at preparing healthy meals, we practice often. Many argue that a full 10,000 hours of the right kind of practice is needed to become good at anything. Share data on persistence and writing center successes. Let students know their efforts make a difference.

8. **Encourage Reading for Pleasure.** Research has long identified the positive impact of reading on writing. Encourage your students to immerse themselves in the words of their favorite authors. Encourage them to explore new authors, too. Consider sharing your own favorite books and authors and setting up a discussion board on your Learning Management System for students to discuss what they've been reading.

9. **Offer Peer Review and Teaching Opportunities.** According to Edgar Dale's Cone of Learning, we remember 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, and a whopping 90 percent of what we say, do, or teach.[iv] Provide peer-to-peer and student teaching opportunities through rethinking assessments, peer reviews, and student critiques.

10. **Communicate the Relevance and Impact of Writing Skills.** If we asked students why they are pursuing advanced degrees, many would respond with a desire for better job prospects and a more secure future for themselves and their families. To further motivate your students' efforts, share data on the skills employers look for in prospective employees.

Smiley and West write that "youthful energy and passion mixed with seasoned collaboration is a combustible agent for explosive change."[v] Each of us can inspire, support, and encourage writing growth through our curriculum and through our instruction. As educators, we can help stoke the "fire ignited by youth" of all ages through curriculum and instruction that encourages students to reflect, question, and grow. The energy you consistently bring to your classrooms can serve as the agent for continued growth in areas of writing and beyond.

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