



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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WHY STUDENTS MUST BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR WRITING

Not long ago, a colleague stopped by my office to bemoan the quality of his students' writing; in his hands were several research papers. As I recall, one paper had 52 misspelled words on one page; another contained about 100 words—written in large script to “fill the page”; another was written in incomplete sentences. Inherent in my colleague's comment was the often unspoken, but nevertheless believed, notion that the English department is not doing its job, that students cannot write because we have not taught them.

My main comment in response, defense, retaliation to my colleague was that he has every right not to accept any paper of poor quality for a passing grade and has the right to reject a paper that obviously did not meet his standards for competence. I must admit to sputtering these remarks and not making a very coherent response in defense of all of us who (whether we like this terminology or not) are in the trenches.

You probably can guess the rest. Once alone, I thought of a dozen better, more cogent, more useful responses that I should have given and, even more tardily, I felt angry at myself and at my colleague. So here it is—my response to all you out there who *require* writing in your classes but are not adamant about demanding competent writing and holding students accountable for what they put on paper and how they put it there. Yes, spelling should count.

The concept of writing across the curriculum (or writing to learn) works only if the required writing is evaluated in some way and at some level of expertise. I am referring to any type of writing: essay questions, short answer, term papers, book reports, research projects, and the like. The standards of writing competence by which papers are judged may vary among instructors, but if students are not shown that the quality of their writing eventually counts in the classroom, they never will be concerned about quality. They will learn to value quantity over quality, and they will learn minimum ef-

fort will make a passing grade. In short, they will have learned well what you taught them—e.g., that correctness does not really matter and that they will be forgiven for not knowing much about spelling, or punctuation, or sentence structure, or style, or any other element used to present their ideas.

Failing to evaluate students' writing undercuts, cheats, and demeans every party involved in the educational process. It cheats students because it teaches them the lesson that incompetence in their language is acceptable and that English teachers are the only ones who care about the quality of their writing. I am reminded of a recent conversation with a business communications student who, as an accounting major, was taking an upper-level accounting course. Her writing for me was very inconsistent, a B here, a D there. Her accounting instructor had assigned a research paper, but as the student so happily put it, “He don't mind about spelling mistakes and all them other things like you do.” Perhaps *he don't* mind, but *I* do; and I think others in this student's career path will also mind. What lesson has been taught here? Clearly, it is that only picky people in English instruction care about standards, that poor usage, written or spoken, only counts against you in English class.

If only English teachers are perceived as caring about matters of style and correctness, then we become the villains in the educational sequence. We cannot win because we cannot get students beyond the idea that we are demanding, that our requirements are seriously out of touch with their other educational realities. Once this idea is entrenched, it subtly undermines all other faculty who use writing in their classes: “Don't take X's class because you'll have to do a term paper or write essay questions on your test.”

Finally, requiring writing without holding students accountable for the quality of that writing violates the whole notion of educating students. As we send out more and more graduates who have never been made to master basic skills, we powerfully undermine their ability to function as workers, as parents, as social beings, as constituents of the world. We graduate people who *will* be held accountable as soon as the ink on their



application is dry. Many of them will not be prepared to meet the basic demands of the workplace; some may not even be successful in filling out the job application. All surely will be examined in light of the institution granting them their degree, and blame will be assigned. The true measure of a college's success is not how many graduate, but how *qualified* those graduates are. Thus, not making students responsible for the quality of their work undermines the value of the student, the teacher, and the college. We cannot afford to continue sending the schizophrenic signal that students should write but should not bother about the competence of their writing.

These are strong words, perhaps strong enough to evoke these responses: "Fine, I'll just stop requiring writing of any sort," or "Okay, I'll mark all that writing, but everyone will fail my class." As for the first response, you must not move backward in educating your students. We are late enough in picking up the writing-to-learn concept, and we simply cannot afford to lose more ground. You must keep using writing. It is the right thing to do. To the second response, you are correct. There may be more bad grades. That is part of what holding students accountable for their writing means. They must prove to you through writing that they understand accounting, or taxes, or economics, or pipe fitting, or marketing. The English faculty's task is to teach the language of language; your task is to teach students to use that language to write about your content area. If they cannot demonstrate competence in that skill, why is it that they deserve a college degree? Will an employer require less competence? Do law enforcement officers "tell" a final accident report? Does a real estate appraiser give an oral final estimate? Can any of us "call in" our taxes?

What, then, can you do? I offer a few ideas for your consideration.

1. Explain from the first day of class that any writing will be evaluated, but just as quickly explain *how* you will evaluate it.
2. If you are unclear how to balance content against correctness, see someone in your English department for guidelines.
3. Avoid red ink; it sends all the wrong messages.
4. Do not try to do everything at once. Try one class at a time, or one test during the term, or one question on one test.
5. Require students to look at and read professional articles in their academic area. Make a point about the value of correctness.
6. Create a glossary of the most commonly misspelled words in your content area. Give the list to your students and keep adding.

7. Demonstrate that you and your English department are unified in valuing writing.
8. Use team teaching and assignment sharing to reinforce the value of writing in *all* areas of your school.
9. Realize that improvement of any skill comes with practice and reinforcements.

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