



Capacity Building Series

SPECIAL EDITION #25

Writing to Learn

Extending student thinking across the curriculum ...

As teachers, our goal is to help all students “master the skills involved in the various tasks associated with the writing process” (Ontario Curriculum – Language, 2006, p. 12). We teach students to write for different purposes and audiences using a variety of standard written forms and language conventions and to produce writing that reflects their capacity for creative and critical thought. We instruct them in the craft of writing, introducing them to the stages from planning and drafting to editing and final presentation. We work with them to become aware of the needs of their reader and to write with clarity, correctness and precision because they know their reader has only the words on the page to go by when trying to make sense of their message.

As we focus on the process of *learning to write*, we sometimes pay less attention to another kind of writing that is a very powerful tool for student learning in all areas of the curriculum. This is *writing to learn* – those “short, frequent bursts of writing” that are woven into a lesson or a series of lessons to encourage students to explore their own thinking (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2004–2009). The goal, as Peter Elbow explains, “isn’t so much good writing as coming to learn, understand, remember and figure out what you don’t yet know.” Although writing-to-learn texts are not always valued as writing, they “are particularly effective at promoting learning and involvement.”

This monograph has been developed to help you use writing-to-learn activities in your classroom to extend student thinking across the grades, from language to mathematics.

Making student thinking visible ...

Writing-to-learn pieces are informal and generally free-flowing as students explore their personal lines of thinking. Students may list some words, write a sentence or develop a paragraph. Rather than struggling with the codes and conventions of more formal writing, students are encouraged to direct their cognitive energy toward reflecting on

Writing to learn vs learning to write?

“Whatever term we choose, what we mean is the kind of exploratory, thinking on paper we do to discover, develop, and clarify our own ideas. Exploratory writing is typically loosely structured and tentative, moving off in unanticipated directions as new ideas, complications and questions strike the writer in the process of thinking and creating.”

(Bean, 2011, p. 120)

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For information: Ins@ontario.ca

Make writing to learn fun and inviting ...

Set it up as an invitation (and tell students why you are doing this):

- Ask students to write about what they know, where learning is making sense, where it is confusing and what they are doing with new information.

Focus on the quality of thinking, not the mechanics of writing:

- Don't read every word, every line or every piece of writing.
- Look beyond organization – it may be messy and disorganized.

Use the writing as discussion starters:

- Ask students to tell others what they have written about their thinking and learning.
- Encourage questioning and conversation about the writing.

their thinking. As a result, writing-to-learn pieces are not always organized but are rich with ideas and possibilities.

In writing-to-learn texts, the audience is typically the writer himself or herself and not other readers. In the classroom, however, this writing is not completely private. Students may share their writing-to-learn pieces with other students and the teacher for assessment-for-learning purposes. Similar to the way in which teachers use “think aloud” techniques to make their thinking visible for students, students’ writing-to-learn pieces make their thinking visible.

Students and teachers read these pieces with the goal of uncovering students’ thinking:

- What are some of the things they know and understand?
- Where are some of the gaps, confusions or misconceptions?
- What are some of the questions they have?
- What are some of the connections they are making between new and prior knowledge?
- What new insights are they developing?
- How aware are they of the learning processes they use and the effectiveness of those processes?

Grades, marks or levels are not assigned to students’ writing-to-learn exercises. Teachers use the information gleaned from them to determine the effectiveness of their instruction and to adjust lessons and activities to build on student strengths and address areas of need. To maximize the learning potential of writing to learn, teachers provide students with regular feedback about their thinking and learning. Students may share their writing with their peers as well, in partners or small groups, to create opportunities for negotiating and co-constructing knowledge and for engaging in self and peer-assessment and feedback.

Some Key Strategies

Writing-to-learn activities may be used:

- before a learning experience to get students to “warm up” by thinking about what they know or think they know or feel about a new text or topic explored in a previous lesson.
- during a learning experience to get students to “check in” by thinking about what they understand, what connections they are making, where they are unsure and what questions they have.
- after a learning experience to get students to “take stock,” summarizing, synthesizing, evaluating or explaining what they have learned and where they are having difficulty.

CHUNK AND CHEW

- also known as “Stop and Jot” and “Listen-Stop-and-Write” (Topping & McManus, 2002)
- designed to break up instructional episodes into small chunks allowing students to stop and reflect briefly in writing on what they are learning (Gusman, 2002)

Provide specific prompts during a lesson to scaffold and focus students’ responses. Give them about two minutes to identify key ideas, assess where they are making sense of information and where they are puzzled. Encourage them to make connections and ask questions.

QUICK WRITES

- fast writing.
- one of the most basic writing-to-learn strategies

Present students with a prompt – as simple as a word or phrase (“justice,” “web of lies”), an assertion (“There are always two sides to a story.”) or a question (“What have you learned that you find surprising?”). Give students about three to ten minutes to write freely to convey what they already know, think or feel about the prompt and, through the process of writing, discover connections and insights.

LEARNING LOGS/THINK BOOKS

- a journal where students write informally about what they are learning (Klein, 2008)
- a central place where students can think about, reflect upon, clarify, consolidate and convey their learning

Establish the purpose and structure for log entries, including how long students will write, and pose questions or prompts to provide a focus for the writing. Ask students to identify or summarize what they perceive to be the most important information from a text or lesson and to describe where they have questions. Encourage students to talk about their strengths and needs with respect to their learning processes. Try using the Learning Log in conjunction with other learning-to-write activities (a good way to monitor how students' facility with reflective responses is progressing over time).

EXIT SLIPS

- a written response to an open-ended question or prompt posed at the end of a lesson
- encourages students to reflect on what they learned during the lesson

Write the question or prompt on the board for students to refer to as they are writing ("What was the most important thing you learned in this lesson?" "What did you learn that surprised you and why?" "What did you find confusing or what question do you have?"). Have students write their responses on an index card or piece of paper.

ADMIT SLIPS

- like an exit slip except that it occurs at the beginning of a lesson
- encourages students to reflect on what they learned during the previous lesson
- provides the teacher with information about students' prior knowledge and any misconceptions they may have

Ask questions that provide you with information about what students are retaining from their previous learning experience ("What is the most important thing that you learned in our last lesson?" "What is one question you have from yesterday's lesson that you hope will get answered today?") Alternatively, the question or prompt can focus students' thinking on what they know or think they know about an upcoming topic ("What does the term 'hero' mean to you?" "What do you know about Egypt?").

THINK-WRITE-PAIR-SHARE

- an adaptation of Think-Pair-Share (a co-operative learning strategy that supports higher-level thinking)
- provides opportunity for students to deepen and clarify their understanding of an issue or topic through individual reflective writing and shared talk

Ask students during or after an activity to take a minute to think about a key concept, topic or big idea and then to write about it ("What are you thinking?" "What do you think is important to understand or remember?" "How would you explain it to someone else?" "What questions do you have?"). Have students then take a few minutes to pair with another student to discuss what they have written, finally sharing their ideas with the whole group.

THE MUDDIEST POINT

- encourages students to reflect on and monitor their own understanding

After the lesson, have students use writing to explain what they think the main point or key learning from the activity is and what they are most unsure or have questions about ("the muddiest point").

Some Dos and Don'ts for writing to learn ...

You may wish to post these on a class anchor chart.

- Do keep writing!
- Don't stop! Even if you have run out of things to write about, keep your pencil on the paper or fingers on the keyboard.
- Don't back up! Don't waste valuable thinking time by going back to change what you have written.
- Don't edit. Don't waste valuable thinking time correcting spelling or grammar.

AN EMAIL/TWEET TO MY TEACHER

- can also be written on paper (simulating brevity and informality of email and texting)
- can be written to a classmate, too

Ask students to pause briefly to compose an “email” to you either before, during or after the lesson. Encourage them to tell you what they learned that they feel is especially important, interesting or surprising and what they are unclear about (and what you as the teacher should go over again).

WHAT? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

- focuses students on the relevance of what they have learned and the next steps for learning

Introduce these three open-ended questions to students as a general structure for helping them to think about their thinking and learning. As writing prompts, extrapolate more specific questions that relate to the learning experience that you want the students to reflect on (see below).

WHAT?
What did you do? What did you learn? What could you do better?
SO WHAT?
What did you learn? Why do you think you needed to learn it? What questions do you have about it?
NOW WHAT
What is the most important thing you learned? Why is it so important? How could you use this in your life?

In Summary

For many students, especially struggling writers, formal writing assignments can be intimidating and overwhelming. They “must abide by a host of rules that govern the mechanics and conventions of writing yet are also expected – within the constraints of those rules – to formulate original, even creative, thoughts” (Wright, 2012) or communicate content knowledge clearly and accurately.

Writing-to-learn activities on the other hand do not have to abide by the rules that govern formal writing, nor be submitted for evaluation. As Wright (2012) argues, “Short daily writing tasks have the potential to lower students’ aversion to writing and boost their confidence in using the written word.” The amount of writing that is expected however and the time allotted for writing-to-learn activities needs to reflect students’ current levels of writing fluency. Students will continue to learn to write as they write to learn, improving their writing fluency by writing every day.

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“Writing to learn activities shift the focus from having students learn to write or using writing to demonstrate existing knowledge but to learn by writing in which knowledge is transformed through active problem-solving or reflection.”

(Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987)