

Writing Across the Curriculum

Teaching Writing in Large Classes

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What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Bean (2011) distinguishes between active learning—classrooms which demand that the student manipulates knowledge in some way—and passive learning or lectures based on the transmission theory of knowledge. Bean quotes Bligh (2000) to show that lectures are about as good as any other method of transmitting information, but he takes pains to point out that when the goal shifts to having students critically assess that information, standard lectures fall short.

The key to teaching well in large courses appears to be that second aspect or goal: critical assessment and knowledge transformation. To achieve this kind of learning in a large class format, instructors need to break up the lecture with student-centered activities (Bean 2011, p. 203). Many of these activities involve writing in some way.

Exploratory Writing Tasks

Bean advocates tying lectures to writing tasks so that students cannot perform the writing tasks unless they listen closely to the lectures. He uses the term “low-stakes writing” to create a category of writing that includes asking questions, posting ideas to Moodle-based discussion lists, and writing paragraph-length responses to ideas from the lecture (Bean 2011, p. 203).

Bean notes that exploratory writing at the start of a lecture can be used to cue students to connect previously learned material to today’s lecture. Here is a list of kinds of short writing assignments that can be used to move from passive to active learning:

- Assign one minute papers prompted by a questions such as “What is puzzling you about today’s lecture?” Ask one or two students to read their papers or collect them and read one or two aloud.
- Require students to submit one or two paragraph summaries of a previous lecture. These provide excellent feedback that instructors can use to adjust their lectures.
- Pose your lectures as questions about ideas in your field, and then ask students to summarize your stance or answer to that question. Students learn that your lectures as arguments rather than information (Bean 2011, p. 204).
- Create a formal (graded, extended) assignment that requires students to use lecture material to complete it.
- Model critical thinking by structuring your lecture around a question you had and then taking students through the process you went through as you tried to answer it.

Use Online Discussions

“Low-stakes writing” can be usefully assigned to online forums—Moodle discussions, blogs, and Twitter feeds. The key here is the prompt for this writing. The best prompts require students to begin by connecting to something said in a course reading, discussion, or lecture and then add their own take on that idea or issue.

Ideas For Instructors: Exploratory Writing

Bean offers over 20 ideas for using exploratory writing in courses (2011, p. 131-142). Here are some of those ideas that are best suited to large classes:

1. In-class freewrites that are collected and graded pass/fail. These can be done at the start of class to check reading recall or if students are prepared. These can also be assigned at the end of the class to tie together the main points of the lecture
2. Moodle discussion list postings ahead of class or as a follow-up to class discussion. These can be prompted by questions that model the kinds of questions that appear on exams.
3. One-minute papers: response to an exam-like prompt. When done in class and collected then, they replicate the exam constraints for writing short answer questions.
4. Lecture summaries (one paragraph) due in class; pass/fail.
5. Lecture on two (or more) scholarly perspectives on an event or concept; require students to write a paragraph that takes a position in support of one or another of the perspectives.
6. Exam preparation journals. Instructors distribute questions early in the course that may appear on the exams, and students work on answering them as they progress through the course.
7. Design a larger assignment (2-4 pages) that requires students to integrate material from a sequence of lectures over several weeks. I have used online journal entries as an ongoing requirement and then had students use those entries as raw material for a reflective paper due at the end of the course.
8. Microthemes: essays that can be written on notecards (so they are short) but that require significant thinking on the part of students to create. Examples include summary writing, focused arguments, inductive reasoning, and puzzle-solving (Bean, Drenk, & Lee 1982).
9. Require students to submit questions that could become part of class lecture material.

References And Links

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