

Better Teaching through Better Writing: Student Writing in the Education Department

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Good teachers are effective communicators, and one of the ways in which teachers communicate with their students is through writing. What teachers write is often read not only by their students, but by colleagues, community members, and the parents of the students. In short, what we write and how we write it does make a difference.

Over the years the Education Department has worked diligently to stress the importance of clear and thoughtful writing. One of the ways the department emphasizes the importance of writing is by administering a Writing Assessment to all of its first-year Childhood Studies and Early Childhood Studies majors and to transfer students. The assessment involves the drafting and composing of an essay on an assigned topic during a one-hour period. Its purpose is to assess the quality of students' writing as well as provide specific feedback on writing strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the Writing Assessment is designed to identify those Childhood Studies and Early Childhood Studies majors who may need developmental support in meeting the writing standards necessary for successful entry into the teaching profession.

The process of the Writing Assessment is as follows. Incoming students are notified via the college orientation process that they are required to take the Writing Assessment prior to their first semester. Typically this is during the orientation program. The Writing Assessment is administered and scored by trained Education Department faculty and graduate students. Once all of the assessments are collected, they are scored by two readers using a rubric devised in 1991 and revised by college faculty in 1995 and again in 1996. Each faculty member assigns a score of 1-4 in each of four categories (Idea Development, Organization, Expression, and Mechanics). If a significant discrepancy exists between two readers, a third reader scores the assessment. If there is still disagreement, the assessment will be read by the entire group until a consensus score emerges.

The students receive the results of the Writing Assessment prior to registration in order to facilitate accurate registration for general education and departmental writing courses. Those students who score below a designated score are required to enroll in one of two special sections of English Composition. These special sections are smaller than typical composition sections and are taught using the Writer's Workshop paradigm for teaching writing skills. Students in these sections use the Reading and Writing Center as a required part of their composition class. These same students are reassessed at the beginning of the next semester. Those still in need of developmental assistance are strongly encouraged to visit the Reading and Writing Center on campus during the semester. Students' advisors are kept informed of their progress. The Education Department Writing Assessment Committee maintains a database of students' scores. In addition to its archival function, this database supports the research efforts of the committee.

Faculty members in the Education Department use writing assignments to serve several different purposes: to engage students with the material presented in class and in the reading, to enable the professor to get to know students better, to give

students opportunities to do the kind of writing that teachers do, and to encourage students to reflect on their own learning and experiences. Often, different purposes overlap within one writing assignment.

In order to engage the students in thinking more about the class material, many teachers provide time in class for free-writes, which students then share with each other and/or with the teacher. The free-writes are usually on a topic of the teacher's choosing. Several Education Department faculty have their students write reviews of videos shown in class; students may choose two or three videos to write about from among all the videos shown that semester. Book reviews are another common assignment, with some faculty assigning the book to be reviewed and others encouraging the students to review a book of their own choosing that is related to the course material.

Research papers are assigned in several education courses. These provide the opportunity for students to go beyond what is being discussed in class and to explore topics that they are especially interested in. Professors who assign research papers report that they usually have to spend class time reviewing the process of researching and writing a paper, and that students need a lot of help in citing references and preparing the bibliography. Often, faculty encourage or require their students to turn in drafts of the research paper so that they can provide feedback throughout the process. The proliferation of material on the WEB presents new challenges to professors who assign research papers, because many students assume that all information on the internet is accurate and reliable.

Essay exams are typical of many courses in the Education Department. Some faculty give at least one exam or part of an exam as a take-home assignment; in these cases, students are expected to respond thoughtfully to questions that are more challenging than those that would be found on an in-class exam. Several professors write essay exam questions that require the students to apply what they have learned in the course to a "real-

life” scenario.

Professors in the Education Department frequently use writing as a way of getting to know their students better and keeping track of what students are learning. One professor, for example, asks students to complete a “focus” card after each class. On an index card, the student writes his or her observations, comments, concerns and/or questions after each class. The professor returns the cards to the students at the next class, with written feedback. This has been particularly helpful for her in establishing a personal connection with students in a large lecture class. Another professor follows a similar procedure, which he calls “PMIQ” cards. PMIQ stands for “plus, minus, interesting, questions.” After each class, students write down on a card what they liked or disliked about the material, what they found interesting, and whatever questions they have. Again, the professor responds to the students’ comments at a later class.

Journals are a common feature in many courses in the Education Department and take a variety of forms. In some practicum courses, where professors may not have frequent contact with students, students keep a daily journal of what they have been doing and learning out in the field. Their faculty supervisor reviews the journal periodically as a way of keeping informed about the student’s experiences; supervisor and student can also use the journal entries as a focus for discussions and feedback. Journals are also used in more traditional courses. One professor uses a response journal as a way of maintaining personal contact with the students. Students respond to questions posed by the instructor, who responds in turn to their comments. This also gives students who are uncomfortable speaking in class an alternate form of class participation.

From the first course they take in their major, students in Childhood Studies and Early Childhood Studies are involved in doing the kind of writing that real teachers do. For their methods courses, they write lesson plans and curriculum units and implement these planned activities in local classrooms. Whenever

students are involved in working with children, they are expected to communicate in writing with the children's parents about what they are doing and why. Writing a letter to parents (especially to parents whom you haven't met) to explain a project or unit is a much more daunting assignment than students realize at first. Frequent opportunities to write to parents help students become more comfortable with this typical teacher task. Students learn about writing to children through a pen-pal project with primary classes in local elementary schools. College students exchange letters with the children for the entire semester, then travel to the schools to meet their correspondents. This project gives students a chance to get a firsthand understanding of children as writers.

Assessing children's development and learning is an important responsibility of the teacher, as is communicating what you know about a child. Education Department faculty teach students about this through the use of examples of how classroom teachers utilize writing to help their students become more capable learners. For example, all schools have a system of assessing students' progress. Although the methods of assessment may vary from school to school, generally speaking, all methods of assessment involve a process of reporting results to parents, colleagues, and the students themselves. These reports must be written clearly and concisely and be easily understood by a diverse audience. This being the case, the author of the assessment report must possess the necessary writing skills to communicate effectively with the audience. Reports of observation and assessment data require a certain type of writing that many students find difficult; frequent opportunities to practice this kind of writing help students feel more at ease with this important responsibility. Beginning in their introductory courses, students are involved in observing children in natural settings and writing about their observations. All students take one course that focuses on observation and assessment of children. For this course, students do an in-depth study of a particular child, culminating in an extensive written report. Students also come to realize the powerful effect of written

reports in determining how others view a child's capabilities and needs. They learn to write about what a child can do and does know, rather than focusing on the child's deficits.

Improving the lives of children and families often involves the need to convince people that new ideas and programs are in the best interests of children and families. For example, upon graduation many of our students find themselves requesting funding for after-school programs or increased funding for pilot programs targeted for at-risk children. Programs such as these often begin with a well-written position statement. If a convincing document is not provided at the onset, chances are that the request will never reach the desk of the person making the decisions. In many education classes, students write position papers on particular issues or defend a particular point of view. One of the underlying purposes of this kind of assignment is for students to learn how important it is to be able to give good reasons for why they're doing what they're doing. As teachers, they will often be challenged by parents and administrators to explain why they teach in a certain way or use a certain method (a typical example is the type of reading program a teacher follows). They will need to know how to interpret, apply, and explain the research on teaching practices.

Teachers become more effective practitioners through continual self-evaluation and reflection. Students in Early Childhood and Childhood Studies engage in a number of different writing activities to promote reflection. Assignments such as writing their literacy autobiographies or writing about their own childhood help students to relate class material to their personal experiences and make connections with the experiences of the children they will be teaching. These assignments also help students to understand the context in which their own beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning developed. Written reflections are also incorporated into students' field experiences as practice teachers. After each teaching experience, they reflect in writing on what they and the children have learned. Students are asked to write about what

they would change the next time they taught this same lesson or activity, and what they have learned from the experience that they could apply in general to their teaching. This reinforces the importance of using writing as a means of self-improvement. Faculty talk with students about how to reflect upon teaching experiences and in many cases develop reflective questions that provide the students with guidelines of how to think critically about their roles in the lives of children and families. The ability to reflect upon complex issues is a skill that the Education Department reinforces and monitors throughout students' preservice training.

In several education classes, students compile portfolios. These may take the form of showcase portfolios, where they highlight their best work from the semester, or portfolios that document their progress through the course. In methods and practicum classes, students compile professional portfolios. The process of selecting items to include in the professional portfolio encourages the student to reflect on who they are as teachers and how they wish to present themselves to prospective employers. Faculty provide guidance and feedback for students throughout the portfolio process.

The education faculty work hard to help students see that writing is integrally connected to teaching, and that improving their ability to communicate effectively in writing can also improve their teaching. The departmental writing committee meets regularly throughout the semester and reports monthly to the entire department. This keeps discussions of writing on our department agenda, and reminds us of the importance of working together to help our students become better writers as well as better teachers.

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