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It's syllabus day for EN370: History and Practice of Rhetoric, a class mandatory for my degree plan, and my peers and I have already been assigned a mini-paper due the next time we meet. As a matter of fact, it isn't just one mini-paper to start off the semester, but *ten* mini papers that are spread throughout the 16-week course. These mini-papers, as the instructor explained, will be completed before class, incorporating information from the readings that will be discussed that next class period, serving as a "writing-to-learn" assignment. With the outlined criteria, I realized it meant I'd need to create a cohesive and thoughtful mini-paper about material I not only read, but also digested myself; I didn't have the aid of in-class discussions to write these daunting assignments. To meet the goals of engaging with theoretical texts more deeply and preparing for in-class discussions, we were required to reflect on each week's assigned reading(s) with an analysis and application of the concepts in these mini-papers, learning to work closely and complexly with primary texts. In turn, these papers scaffolded my skills to create a higher-stakes, rhetorical analysis paper at the end of the semester, encompassing what we had learned about theories of rhetoric, using a rhetorical lens to analyze, and working closely with a primary text of our choosing.

As the semester progressed and I wrote more mini-papers, I began participating in discussions more often, learning the material more deeply, and even talking about the course outside of the classroom. These writing-to-learn assignments, almost initially intimidating enough to drop the course, became a valuable tool in which I could engage and interact with the readings in a closer, deeper way. Spending time with the material on my own, sitting with the text and exploring the ideas, the words, and the message instead of solely reading it provided me with a better understanding and a firmer confidence in my ability to interpret and communicate information.

According to the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Clearinghouse website, writing-to-learn assignments encourage students to better digest course material through low-pressure writing exercises. These activities could potentially take as little as 5 minutes to complete in class or be assigned as a "brief" out-of-class activity, but even with the distinct ways to implement this learning strategy, the benefits remain the same (WAC Clearinghouse, 1997-2024).

Writing-to-learn assignments are different from high-stakes formal assignments because the former is both relaxed and impromptu with the primary goal being to help students learn and explore new ideas and topics introduced in the classroom (Nathan et al., 2022). The Georgetown University Writing Program defines low-stakes writing as assignments that are "short, typically ungraded, and focused on thinking through a problem or question" (n.d., para. 2). While the writing-to-learn assignments I completed in EN370 were worth points (though only added up to 1/3 of our grade, acting as a cushion for other assignments), the professor made it clear what was expected of us. Instead of providing a summary of the assigned readings, students were graded upon their demonstration of critical thinking and exploration of the assigned readings.

As American composition scholar Janet Emig (2003) states in her piece, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," both learning and writing are based on making "active, engaged, [and] personal" connections between hand, eye, and brain (p. 27). Through the active use of three different parts of the body, writing as a mode of learning promotes deeper learning and engagement with materials. With the help of low-pressure writing-to-learn assignments, especially as they capture the thought-flow of the writer, students can create these deeper connections with material, allowing them to learn and retain class material more easily and effectively.

Emig (2003) emphasizes that successful learning also entails "engaged, committed, personal learning" (p. 12). The mini-papers assigned to my class certainly fit into Emig's criteria for successful learning; the prompts encouraged students to engage with the text by asking students to commit to understanding it, further promoting successful learning by challenging students to create personal connections with the readings. These mini-papers were also low-stakes assignments, allowing me and other students to complete short, low-pressure writing activities that, as Georgetown University Writing Program states, prepares students for longer, higher-stakes assignments (n.d.).

These writing-to-learn assignments that provide students the opportunity to write can help "build student fluency in speaking and writing" and even allow students to "gain confidence by creating a safe space for learning," as stated by Tonya Leal, a teacher in California (Nathan et al., 2022, p. 14). In other words, through these exploratory writing assignments, students will not only grow in their own writing ability, but they can also build confidence within the classroom, both being skills that students can continue to grow and nurture past these writing-to-learn assignments.

Low-stakes writing activities aren't confined to mini-papers, like my instructor chose to incorporate, but instead can take on a variety of forms. Belinda Blevins-Knabe (1987), a psychology professor at the University of Arkansas, integrated a diverse set of writing-to-learn assignments into her developmental psychology course. These writing-to-learn activities included 500-word out-of-class writing assignments and in-class peer collaboration essays, encouraging students to work on analysis and application skills allowing them to “assimilate and accommodate” the lecture content in a way that worked for them (Blevins-Knabe, 1987, p. 240). Role-taking activities were also incorporated, including writing a “poem or short story from the perspective of a preoperational child” (p. 240). Because these students were encouraged to explore the class material in a nontraditional way, critical thinking was inspired, which prompted each student to digest the same information from a unique perspective.

Writing-to-learn assignments also present teachers with an accessible way to connect with their students. Because these short, informal writing assignments often ask the student to reflect upon and critically analyze course material, the teacher's feedback can also be low-pressure and conversational in return. As Nancy Sommers (2013), director of the WAC program at Harvard, states, providing students with feedback can encourage students to understand that “teachers view them as people with things to say, as thinkers capable of insight and depth” and even that they are respected as individual thinkers just through casual, conversational feedback on these informal writing-to-learn activities (p. xi). This idea was reflected in the EN370 course, as the professor would leave personalized feedback throughout the document, leaving encouraging comments, questions for continued discussion, and other perspectives I may have missed for each mini-paper I completed.

Writing to learn engages the brain and body in the same tasks: comprehending, exploring, and making sense of information. As found by a multitude of researchers, formulating these connections between ideas allows for a deeper level of learning and retention.

Though the idea of mini-papers seemed stressful, I found the low-pressure, reading-centered, and exploratory writing to be beneficial for my engagement with and retention of the course material. From the learning and retention benefits to versatility of the assignments, researchers, professors, and students alike have found writing-to-learn activities to be beneficial to students across curriculums. If I could go back and speak with myself at the beginning of that course, I'd emphasize the role of writing as a process, not just a finished product. Writing to learn engages the brain and body in the same tasks: comprehending, exploring, and making sense of information. As found by a multitude of researchers, formulating these connections between ideas allows for a deeper level of learning and retention. Because of these facts, educators ought to de-emphasize writing as a product and instead focus on writing as a means of learning, giving students opportunities to create connections, engage with information, and explore everything else that is a rewarding part of the composing process.

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