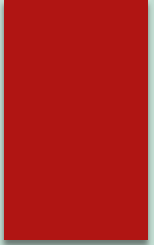# Writing to Learn:

IDEAS EMERGING FROM THE MURK

Agenda

- Purpose
- Introductions
- Free-write
- Discussion
- Exploration of WTL activities
- Reporting out

"Putting an idea into written words is like defrosting the windshield: The idea, so vague out there in the murk, slowly begins to gather itself into a sensible shape."

"Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know—and what we don't know—about whatever we're trying to learn."

William Knowlton Zinsser, 1988
Writing to Learn: How to Write--And Think--Clearly about Any Subject at All

Consider these questions as you free-write:

How have you experienced writing to learn as a learner?

How have you used writing to learn in your teaching?

What obstacles might prevent you from using WTL activities in your classroom?

Discussion

- Successful WTL activities?
- Unsuccessful?
- Obstacles?

learning, these authors outline projects that focus on writing in entomology, clinical nursing, psychology, and mathematics, all with similar results: students learned key concepts and understood material more fully while also practicing some features of discourse for the specified discourse community. Thus, writing to learn can have additional positive effects in helping students mature as effective communicators even though the initial goal is to help students become better learners.

Examples of Writing-to-Learn Activities

Writing-to-learn activities can happen frequently or infrequently in your class; some can extend over the entire semester; some can be extended to include a wide variety of writing tasks in different formats and to different audiences. Use the list below to read more about writing-to-learn activities.

- The reading journal
- Generic and focused summaries
- Annotations
- Response papers
- Synthesis papers
- The discussion starter
- Focusing a discussion
- The learning log
- Analyzing the process
- Problem statement
- Solving real problems
- Pre-test warm-ups
- Using Cases
- Letters
- What counts as a fact?
- Believing and doubting game
- Analysis of events
- Project notebooks
- The writing journal

Using Technology with WTL Activities

If you teach in a computer classroom, if students can bring laptops or tablets to class, or if students have easy access to computers outside of class, WTL activities of all sorts can be adapted for in-class writing.

What Kinds of WTL Tasks Can Be Carried Out in a Computer-Supported Classroom?

- Summarize and respond to readings

References

WAC Clearinghouse. (2022). *What is writing to learn?*

https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/wac/intro/wtl/

Young, A., & Fulwiler, T. (1986). *Writing across the disciplines: Research into practice.*

Boynton/Cook.

Zinsser, W.K. (1988). *Writing to learn: How to write--and think--clearly about any subject at all.*

Harper & Row.

Appendix

(excerpt from an interview with a geography professor)
"When I have used [ideas from the workshop], I have found my courses, especially the larger enrollment courses, are less stiff, formal, and dependent on lectures. Especially the use of freewrites has been a great help in stimulating discussion and class participation."
(as cited in Young & Fulwiler, 1986, p. 245)