

Challenging Gifted and Creative Students Write to Think; Write to Learn

By Christine Maefsky

[This article was published in the winter 2010 issue of "The Question Mark", the newsletter of Reading for Gifted and Creative Children Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association.]

Well into my teaching career I had a realization about a problem my own teachers had created for me when they assigned writing. It was a problem I was passing on to my own students. My teachers (and I) assumed students would know what they were going to say before they began to write. That certainly seemed reasonable. Students would begin with a title or a position or a thesis statement. From there they would state the details or support and then conclude with a summation of the support. "Say it; describe it; say it again" was the idea. That way of writing sometimes worked for me as a student writer, but it too often left me scrambling to come up with supportive ideas and beliefs that I didn't really have.

I began to realize that I often did not know what I thought about a topic until I was done, or at least far along, with writing. My thinking about a topic evolved as I was writing. The very act of writing generated for me deeper, more complex thinking and greater understanding than I'd had before. The process itself clarified my thinking and beliefs and led me to know what I thought. That thinking was what then led to my title or thesis statement.

As I thought more about writing and teaching, I realized that there are many reasons why teachers ask students to write. In our best assignments, we make clear to students their purpose in writing. Students write to inform or persuade or entertain or explain or describe. Each of these purposes has at its root the call for communication with an audience. These are the writing forms expected on state tests and in advanced classes. They receive a great deal of emphasis, as well they should, from teachers of the English language arts. But what we teachers too often fail to acknowledge is our purpose in giving students a writing assignment.

In our wiser moments, we recognize that the potential of writing goes beyond being a tool of communication and that the reasons we have students write go beyond preparing them to do well on

state exams or college entrance applications. We know we can use writing to promote student thinking, learning, reflection and engagement. We know we can use writing to assess what students have learned. And we recognize that we can use writing as a tool for differentiating greater complexity, depth and originality for gifted and creative students.

Students should not just learn to write but write to learn. They should be consistently given opportunities to explore their own thinking and to generate new thinking through writing. Expecting students to express their thinking in writing leads them to more clearly articulate their thinking. Writing is a door to clearer thinking and better learning. With the right challenge, new thinking may occur. Whether the end result is composing, hypothesizing, designing, developing arguments, problem solving, decision making or invention, writing to think can involve students in the act of making connections, transferring learning and generating new knowledge.

For these reasons, teachers should use writing regularly as an instructional tool. In order to maximize all students' learning across subject areas, student writing should be a regular part of teachers' planning. A system like the Collins Writing Program with its Five Types of Writing can serve teachers and students well in effectively using writing across the curriculum. The Five Types of Writing recognize the goal of each writing assignment and make that goal clear to students up front. A writing assignment may be asking students only to generate ideas about a topic (Type One). Or, it may be asking students to tell in writing what they have learned in a lesson or unit (Type Two). Or, the assignment may be raising expectations for content and skill by providing guidance through Focus Correction Areas (Type Three). The writing may be increasing students' engagement and collaboratively reinforcing their learning through the use of peer editing (Type Four). Or, it may be setting the expectation of fully revised, edited and publishable quality work (Type Five). Each of the Types of Writing, to greater and lesser degrees, has a place in all content classes. The kind of thinking generated in the different types of writing is the kind of thinking we expect in all subjects. Writing makes students' thinking visible. It is a tool for content area learning.

Whatever writing system teachers use, the important thing is for them to use it purposefully, frequently and consistently. It should be focused on clear goals stated up front for students. It should be an integral part of formative assessment in the classroom and accompanied by feedback that is specific and timely. As teachers we can learn a lot from our students' writing, not just about what they know but also about how they think. It is a way to ensure that the learning we're striving for is taking place. We

find out where learning is not occurring and, when students write about it, we can have a better understanding of why the learning is not happening and what we can do about it. The first time students are asked to write about their learning should not be on final tests or state exams. If they are to do well at expressing their learning in those summative assessments, they need to have regular practice in the form of frequent formative assessments along the learning way.

Recently I had a clear reminder of how writing is thinking and how thinking evolves through the process of writing. Math students were given the assignment of choosing a problem they thought they had gotten wrong from the previous night's homework and explaining why it was hard. Josh wrote, "#14 $c^2 = a^2 + b^2 - 2ab \cos C$ is the problem I can't get. I don't understand why there aren't angles in the equation. But I guess that it's because the law of cosines helps you find out missing angles and sides." Writing led Josh to answer his own perplexing question. In her use of writing to teach mathematics, Josh's math teacher showed her respect for students' thinking by giving them the tool of writing and expecting them to use it to think about and to learn mathematics.

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