

Writing Matters

From assessment studies conducted by The University of Hawai'i Mānoa Writing Program

Helping Students Make Connections: A Self-Assessment Approach

It's not uncommon to hear it in the department mail room, or where the faculty gathers for lunch. We'll call it "Professor's Lament #5":

How come my students just don't get it? They've already written three lab reports in this course. I even gave them a handout on the format. It's like every assignment I give them is brand new. You'd think they'd be able to make connections and use what they learned in one assignment on the next!

Our assessment research here at the Mānoa Writing Program shows that Lament #5 is based on fact. Research in psychology suggests why: human beings simply don't "make connections" automatically, or even readily. We are "situation-specific" learners, and often we see connections between and across situations only when someone points the connections out. The good news is that once we see connections, we usually take advantage of them.

You can help your students make and see connections by promoting self-assessment: **students reflect on what they do, decide what works and what doesn't, and describe what works in terms that may apply to subsequent tasks.** This basic sequence helps students articulate and internalize writing strategies they can use again and again.

Because the work of self-assessment is done primarily by students, it adds little to your workload while providing a touchstone to which you can refer with later assignments. Moreover, self-assessments give information about individual students' thinking processes that can help focus your instruction.

In this issue of **Writing Matters**, we describe several self-assessment practices that some of our UH colleagues use to help their students make connections across writing assignments and expand their understanding of writers' strategies.

1. Help students to think of themselves as writers with each assignment

- Have students attach an "author's self assessment" to each writing assignment in the form of responses to questions such as these:
 - What steps did you take as you worked on the assignment?
 - What problems did you encounter?
 - How did you try to overcome the problems?
 - What strategies worked well for you in writing this assignment?
 - How do you know the strategies worked—what's the evidence?
 - What 1 or 2 things would you like feedback on?
- Help students make connections between drafts (and between assignments). Ask them to jot down their answers to these questions before they begin their final draft:
 - What are your main goals for the next draft (or piece of writing)?
 - What strategy that you used on your first draft will you try again (or modify) with this draft? Why?
 - What one new strategy will you try in order to make your next draft more effective?
 - How will you know if it works?

Most professors give some feedback on each student's draft text. Some write comments in margins. Others focus their comments around observations that students make in their self-assessments—an approach that may save you time.

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2. Make connections among different assignments

- Once or twice during the semester, ask students to review a number of the assignments and self-assessments they've written and then answer questions such as these:

- What seem to be the connecting concepts or ideas among different assignments?
- In what ways have you organized and supported your main idea(s)? Have these ways worked for you? Why or why not?
- What new strategies have you tried in doing the writing assignments in this course? Have you used any of them more than once? Why or why not?

- Ask students to compare the kinds of feedback received from you or their peers on different

assignments. Students can then answer these questions:

- What is working well in your writing?
- What 2 to 3 things do you think you could try next to improve your writing?

- At the end of a course, ask students to evaluate themselves as writers by reviewing all of their self-assessments. Students look for any patterns or recurring observations, e.g., areas of difficulty, projects that have been easy to write, strategies they have often used to solve a writing problem. Students analyze what they've learned about themselves as writers and describe how they might use what they've learned in the future.

3. Make connections across courses

- At the beginning of a course, ask students to write a brief description of the kinds of writing (e.g., abstracts, lab reports, research reports, syntheses) they did last semester or over the past year.

- After you've described a writing assignment, ask students to compare your assignment to what they have learned about writing in other courses. For example:

- What did you learn in English 100 that you will be able to use when writing a literature review?
- How is writing a book review similar to and different from writing an abstract?

- What do you already know about writing lab reports that you will be able to use when writing reports in this course? What won't you be able to use?

- When you talk in class about new writing assignments, when you give feedback, and when you hold conferences, refer to the self-assessments that students have written. Try as much as possible to compare and contrast the processes students will need to do your assignments with processes—research processes as well as writing processes—they've learned and used in the past.

4. Help students develop criteria to assess their writing in different circumstances

- When students assess their own writing, they are working with criteria or standards they have gleaned from past instructors and classroom experiences. (That's how they've come up with such "rules of thumb" as "Don't begin a sentence with but" and "You have to include three examples.") Ask them to jot down the "rules of writing" they have internalized. Sometimes you can build on criteria they already use.

- List on the board or in a handout the criteria *you* will use in evaluating your students' writing. Discuss the reasons for the emphasis you (and others in your field) place on certain features—e.g., justification of inquiry method, summaries of related research studies, support for thesis, etc.

- If students are working in peer feedback groups, ask them to make lists of the criteria they hear their classmates using when they make comments on each other's work—e.g., "The writer brings in different points of view to build an argument"; "Introduction gives clear idea what the paper is about." At the end of the feedback session, students can compare lists. Or you can create a new criterion list on the board, perhaps with priorities.

- Show students the reviews you've received of a journal submission. Help them to articulate the criteria that the reviewers—professionals in your field—employed in judging quality.

Promising a High Rate of Return: Invest in Self-Assessment Practices

By providing students with opportunities to see beyond the confines of an individual writing assignment, you can help your students make connections across assignments and thereby become more efficient as writers and learners. Encouraging students to judge how well they are achieving their goals helps students to become more responsible for their own learning. The emphasis on self-assessment is also an emphasis on self-motivation: students recognize achievement, seek improvement, and discover that they have skills they can apply in different circumstances. Self-assessment is not a panacea for education, but it does promote more effective (and efficient) learning. It's a worthwhile investment.

For more ideas about teaching with writing, please visit our website at <http://www.hawaii.edu/mwp> or contact the Mānoa Writing Program, Bilger 104, 956-6660, mwp@hawaii.edu.