Assignment Design

What do we know?
- Students struggle with the transition from workplace or high-school writing to academic writing[i]
- Assignment expectations and instructions should be clear[ii].
- "One-shot" writing assignments are more likely to test a student's ability than it is to encourage its growth
- Feedback given at the end of the semester has nowhere to go
- The more meaningful and developmental an assignment, the more engaged the learner will be with both the content and the form.

So what should we do?
- Take the traditional paper or project and break it down into its elements, and spread it out over time: chunk it up and spread it out over the semester.
- Provide focused feedback on the chunks; the last chunk should require little feedback as each chunk should be building on the previous one, and the feedback should have been implemented on each successive chunk. Ideally, the assignments build on each other, so that by the end of the course students have met the course requirements for learning outcomes, have written something that extends their writing skills and facility with academic discourse, and are more able to tackle future writing assignments.
- More time to write and more opportunities to write mean the development over time of stronger writing skills; more writing, more often means more engagement and fewer opportunities for plagiarism.

What are some ways this knowledge can be incorporated into my course?
Use peer reviews
While students may need to be trained to do this, there are a number of advantages. It provides students with a model of writing that is in some ways better than their own, yet closer to their own level than a published piece of writing. Students are more able to pick out from the model ways to improve their own writing[iii], while developing a critical eye for writing. Also, multiple drafts are required when a peer review is part of the design of the assignment, allowing for the incorporation of feedback into their writing and encouraging revision.

Break down the traditional "final paper" into building blocks throughout the semester. Ask students for an annotated bibliography, an outline of their paper, and so on, so that you can provide feedback while the assignment is being done, instead of after.

Effective Feedback

What do we know?
- Research shows that students often don't read feedback[iv], and if they do, it is to justify the grade. If read, the principle is often misunderstood[v].
- Correction of errors has no positive impact on writing development[vi], and there is no demonstrable positive impact on writing development from most traditional forms of feedback[vii]
- Instructors spend a great deal of time providing feedback that may or may not be read, understood, and applied.
- Some errors are developmental and therefore are not to be fixed but passed through[viii], and if a student is using English as an additional language, their acquisition of it will take time[ix]

So what should we do?

Feedback is necessary for student learning[x], so provide feedback that is *planned* and *applicable,* so that it is read and used, *early on* and in an *ongoing* manner

Planned:
- Feedback should be in line with the learning outcomes of an assignment.
- Feedback can differ for each assignment – the instructor does not need to pay attention to all aspects of the writing for each written assignment, or, not equally.
- If grammar and language use are an issue, address it by focusing comments on one or two paragraphs. Students can then be responsible for finding and fixing other occurrences in their text.

Applicable:
- Think of feedback in terms of how students can apply it to the next assignment or to their writing generally.
- Focus on two or three concepts per assignment. This is the amount students can absorb.
- Think of feedback as a tool in our master-apprentice relationship in writing.

Early On:
- Giving feedback early on allows students who have serious issues in their writing or learning to seek help through the duration of the semester. Many students are unaware of how serious their writing problems are.[xi]

Ongoing:
- Providing shorter, more focused feedback more often allows feedback to become a conversation. It's not just about this one assignment; it's about this student's learning of the content and his/her development of writing skills[xii].

What are some ways that this knowledge can be incorporated into my course?

Provide models[xiii]

Models are an excellent way to increase students' understanding of what is required of them in terms of form and interaction with the content. Providing two or three that are good and approach the assignment differently with an explanation of why they are good allows students to master the form more easily. The standards are set high, and students are more likely to self-judge their assignments against the models.

Provide rubrics

Rubrics, provided before an assignment is due and used to comment on the assignment, are an excellent device for both you and your students. It can help train you to focus on two or three areas when giving feedback, and means that your feedback is planned. Students are given ample warning how their assignment will be graded.

Revisit the design of written assignments to incorporate planned, forward-looking feedback …

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[i] Brinkman, 2004

[ii] Pardue & Haas, 2003; Koffolt & Holt, 1997; Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Holt, 1997; Wang & Bakken, 203

[iii] Krashen, 1983

[iv] Leki, 1990

[v] Zamel, 1982; Leki, 1990

[vi] Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; see also Elbow, 1998; Rose, 1989; Holt, 1997

[vii] Leki, 1990; Straub, 2000
[viii] Zamel, 1982; Rose, 1989; Ramsden, 1992; Straub 2000
[ix] CCCC Statement, 2001
[x] Walvoord & Anderson, 1998
[xi] Holt, 1997; Straub, 2000; Wang & Bakken, 2003
[xii] Koffolt & Holt, 1997; Zamel, 1985; Robb et al, 1982; Wang & Bakken, 2003
[xiii] Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999

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