Writing impacts students’ engagement in learning

In his research on writing and students’ engagement, Richard J. Light, professor in the Graduate School of Education and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, confirmed that writing plays a pivotal role in the academic lives and academic success of most students.

To explore this in depth, Light asked 365 undergraduates to describe courses they were currently taking. Questions included:

1. In relation to your other courses, what is your level of total time commitment to this course?
2. What level of intellectual challenge does this course pose to you?
3. What is your level of personal engagement in this course?

The results, says Light, are “stunning. The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students’ level of engagement … is stronger than the relationship between students’ engagement and any other course characteristic. It is stronger than the relation between students’ engagement and their impressions of their professor. It is far stronger than the relationship between level of engagement and why a student takes a course (required vs. elective; major field vs. not in the major). The simple correlation between the amount of writing required in a course and students’ overall commitment to it tells a lot about the importance of writing” (p. 28–29).

Three key findings are that:

- Courses with more than 20 pages of final-draft writing per semester draw nearly twice as much time as courses with no formal writing assignments.
- More writing is highly correlated with more intellectual challenge.
- The impact of writing assignments on students’ self-reported level of engagement is dramatic.

When the researcher questioned students about the structure of writing assignments, he found that courses that require more, shorter papers demand more student time. Students spend about 40% more time on average when asked to do four five-page papers than when asked to write one 20-page piece.

Light also interviewed 60 seniors to discover their ideas about improving student writing. When asked in what context is writing instruction most helpful, the seniors were nearly unanimous that “they believe they learn most effectively when writing instruction is organized around a substantial discipline” (p. 31). Light’s findings would be useful for us to examine as we consider how writing matters at KU.

—JE

For various reasons, our larger community gives a lot of attention to writing in university courses. Faculty members frequently claim that student writing is poor, and many believe the source of this problem is K-12 schools. Students can be unhappy when the quality of their writing is included in evaluation of their understanding of a course. Faculty members are often reminded by students that “this is not an English class.” External critics of higher education (from employers in the business world to higher education advocacy groups) assert that communication skill per se should be a fundamental attribute of college graduates. Some critics also note that extensive writing and reflection generate the deepest understanding in general education and in specific fields.

This complex issue is made more difficult by an apparent lack of consensus about what constitutes excellent writing. People express at least two divergent but not contradictory goals for writing. For some, writing is a critical communication skill that can be transferred or generalized across domains; excellent writing has identifiable characteristics and is an end in its own right. This audience often focuses on formal, structural properties of writing and sometimes expects that designated writing courses are primarily responsible for promoting and certifying a level of skill. For others, writing should be observed and taught within a meaningful context; excellent writing is a means of exploring a field and for expressing understanding. This audience emphasizes functional properties of writing and prefers evaluating how well a passage argues a position or articulates an analysis. From this perspective, the best writing instruction is embedded in the substance of intellectual work in classes from all fields.

An optimal resolution would be a curriculum that includes both forms of instruction; some courses would be taught by faculty members who specialize in teaching writing and some writing-intensive courses would be taught within the lower division in each field to provide growth in contextually rich writing. A number of universities have such a curriculum, in which students select from composition classes in English and writing-intensive courses in all fields.

One potential difficulty with this path is that many faculty members do not feel (and may not be) prepared to evaluate and teach writing, even within their discipline. It is very difficult to create assignments that challenge and stimulate student understanding; it takes practice and consideration to develop assignments that go beyond a rote level but do not baffle students with complexities. It is also difficult to identify important features of assignments and give students clear feedback.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is that writing-intensive teaching will seem like a new competitor for time, and some current activity will have to give way. Given fixed time for course work, additional time on writing must substitute for other activities. Major features of any course are usually essential, so teachers must make hard decisions about reallocating student time to writing from other intellectual activity.

Finally, universities do not change at warp speed; new practices would be duly considered, perhaps until the motivation for change is exhausted. There is the additional issue of increasing class sizes; how can a university like KU build meaningful writing into classes that routinely top 100 students? At a deeper level, teaching writing is supported with non-tenure-track instructors, and redistributing positions would certainly raise difficult questions.

Whither writing at KU? At a conceptual level, it is a no-brainer; our students’ education would be greatly enhanced if they were writing more often and writing in ways that promote intellectual growth. We have the intellectual capital to make that a reality, with an excellent writing community to guide growth in practices and many excellent course examples of enhancing learning through writing. We shall see if we make the hard decisions that would enable changes in students’ education.
“Teaching for Success” tops CTE’s spring schedule

This spring, CTE will host several discussion forums as Teaching Teas and Lunch & Conversation.

Teaching Teas

Three of our teas comprise our “Teaching for Success” (TFS) series. In our courses, we teach a range of learners: students from rural and urban areas, ethnic minorities and cultural majority students, fast and moderate learners, students with identified special needs, well prepared and less prepared, etc. Faculty who have had success teaching some of these learners will share ideas in three sessions. No registration is needed. All will be held at CTE in 135 Budig from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m.

**TFS: Adaptation Benefits All Students**—February 2. Joan Letendre, social welfare, and Sally Roberts, special education. Accommodating special needs students can help all of our students.


**TFS: Accessible Material Benefits All Students**—February 18. Dan Bernstein, CTE, and Joseph Sommers, English. How to help students meet high standards.

**Turning Expertise into Expert Instruction**—February 25. Reva Friedman-Nimz, teaching and leadership. If you’ve wondered, “I know my subject well, but how can I teach it well?” come find the bridge between theory and teaching practice in the disciplines.

**Academic Integrity and Writing in Large Classes**—March 2. Dan Bernstein, CTE; Wallace Johnson, EALC; Tracy Russo, communication studies. Ideas about using writing and promoting integrity in large classes.

**Dealing With the Drag: Sustaining a Course the Last Three Weeks of the Semester**—March 10. Megan Greene, history, and Joan Letendre, social welfare. Discuss ideas with faculty who, like you, struggle with this.

Lunch & Conversation

As with teas, no registration is needed for Lunch & Conversation sessions. All will be held at CTE in 135 Budig from noon to 1 p.m.

**Using Groups (So Students Like Groupwork)**—February 4. Bob Basow, journalism, and Dan Spencer, business. The title says it!

**Teaching Students to Evaluate Sources**—February 13. Lea Currie, KU Libraries, and Michele Eodice, Writing Center. How to help students learn what sources are appropriate for academic work.

**Expect/Respect**—February 27. Paul Friedman, communication studies; Marlesa Roney, vice provost for student success; and Tony Rosenthal, history. If classroom civility is a concern for you, join this discussion.

**What Is the Higher Ed. Reauthorization Act and Why Should I Care?**—March 11. Angela Lumpkin, dean of education. Congress may bring standardized content testing to higher education as a condition for funding students. Discuss the impact.

**Preparing Graduate Students for Academic Careers.** Monica Biernat, psychology (March 3); Rosalea Postma-Carttar, Spanish and Portuguese (March 15); and Chris Hafler, ecology and evolutionary biology (March 16). Sessions especially for graduate coordinators, graduate students.

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CTE to host workshops on engaging students outside of class

On February 17, CTE will host workshops about engaging students outside of class with technology. Web-based tools can give students feedback on their reading assignments or other out of class work. A small group of KU faculty members have been using one such program (EDU).

On the 17th EDU’s author, John Orr, professor of mathematics at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, will demonstrate high-end capacities of the system and talk about potential uses. Also visiting that day will be Kevin Lee, professor of physics at UN-L, who has pioneered the use of graphics and animation in EDU. KU faculty will also discuss EDU’s impact on their students’ learning. Sessions will be held throughout the day; detailed times and locations will be announced. Contact CTE at cte@ku.edu or 785-864-4199 for more information.
Although here at KU we work with a highly literate generation of students, it is part of our role to guide our students to new places, places where information literacy is more than just surfing the web; where writing is more than just answering an email; where the fundamentals of literacy (reading, writing, speaking and listening) are understood and practiced for authentic purposes, not just for a grade or for workplace training.

You may have said at some point that reading student papers is an exercise in disappointment, that students don’t seem to do a very good job on even rudimentary features of text production, that their final products don’t really tell you if they “got it” or not. However, when student writing is only a means to assess knowledge, not a tool for creating it, the product may lack those ineffable qualities you desire.

As a teacher of writing and the director of the KU Writing Center, I have seen a range of assignments come into the writing center over the past five years, many viewed grimly by students, many of them welcome, stimulating, memorable. But from my perspective, assignments that open the conduit to students’ experience, inviting in their own prior and tacit knowledge, and asking for some type of reflection as part of the process, seem to produce papers students are truly invested in and claim to learn from.

While many faculty members and particular departments recognize the importance of designing writing experiences for students that go beyond an individual essay exam or an end-of-semester paper, enough faculty (and their students) could benefit from expanding their knowledge of how students learn through sustained engagement with challenging writing tasks.

You may recall some discussion last spring of a report issued by the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges. Because Provost Shulenburger served on this commission, the issues raised in the report attracted the attention of local media as well as our own faculty here at KU. Following the release of the report entitled “The Neglected ‘R’—The Need for a Writing Revolution1,” the Writing Matters @KU group convened. We are a handful of faculty, staff, administrators, students and librarians who meet monthly to discuss student writing at the University of Kansas. Our conversations were jump-started by two recommendations from the National Commission report:

- Writing instruction in colleges and universities should be improved for all students.
- Writing should be assigned across the curriculum.

At about the same time the Writing Matters @KU group was forming, a seasoned instructor sent the following email message to me:

I wonder if you have a university statement of philosophy about writing across the curriculum here at KU. However, within the General Education Goals set out in 2001, Goal 3 reads: “Improve reading, writing, and numeracy skills, and enhance communication by clear, effective use of language.”

While I am not advocating a quick fix, such as implementing a campus-wide writing across the curriculum program, I do think the time is right to get the campus involved in a conversation about what our goals for student writers and their writing might be.

The current Writing Matters @KU group is exploring many possible options for supporting student writing through curricular change and faculty development. As part of this exploration, we invited Marty Townsend, director of the Campus Writing Program at the University of Missouri, Columbia. Townsend provided us with background on the Writing Intensive program at MU. More information on her visit can be found at the Writing Matters @KU web site.

In an effort to uncover writing that happens in our classrooms, and to highlight several faculty efforts to “make knowledge visible” through effective and efficient writing assignments, the CTE is developing a web gallery...
Many KU faculty embrace writing across the disciplines as a means to develop students capable of leading society. Written and oral communication skills are among those most valuable to engineering professionals yet commonly receive the least attention. We are often first evaluated by these skills, and poor written work implies an unacceptable lack of attention to detail. If professionals cannot spell or communicate, shall we assume them capable of analyzing an aircraft on which our children may fly? In this regard, our curriculum-wide writing assignments serve the very authentic purpose of providing workplace training.

The aerospace engineering curriculum is rich with writing assignments in each semester of our program. Assignments include abstracts, case studies, laboratory reports, inter-office communication, proposals, grants, progress reports, marketing studies, websites and others. Grammar, organization and content are integral grading criteria for assignments. Too many students initially focus on the latter, and thereby miss the importance of the reflection stage that occurs in refining the former. Properly guided reflective writing enables critical thinking skills and deepens understanding of underlying concepts.

A new skill required of today’s engineers is communicating to a population with decreasing numeracy and scientific literacy. Some assignments in our curriculum aim at explaining or proposing concepts based in physics or mathematics to a broad audience unfamiliar with these concepts. The ability to abstract a Space Shuttle event or Mars landing to funding agencies, the voting public, K-12 students or teachers is a critical skill to ensure continued development and safe operation of these programs. The KU Writing Center has helped our faculty develop programs appropriate for our students and engage multidisciplinary campus teams focused on documenting or marketing complex engineering activities.

KU general education goals also identify the need to improve numeracy skills. It is time to engage the KU campus community in student learning, and as we embrace writing across the disciplines, we should strive to develop writing activities that synergistically enhance scientific literacy.

### How Writing Matters @ KU Can Help Writing Matter

how writing matters @ ku can help writing matter

continued from page 4

to display this work. The online posters will showcase instructors who use writing as a mode of learning, infusing diverse writing assignments into their courses. These posters will also capture the instructor’s rationale, goals, outcomes and samples of student writing. Look for the launch of this web resource early in the spring 2004 semester.

One goal of the New Year—and certainly beyond that—could be to be mindful of writing, to think about and share with our students the ways writing has impacted our own learning. In addition, we can look for new ways to actively engage students in writing—to move students to improve their writing. Clearly, KU values research and teaching, and I believe one more way to demonstrate this is by highlighting our efforts to strengthen our students’ writing experiences. Through writing we explore, we record, we disseminate. Writing endures. It retains its power across disciplines and cultures. As scholars we know this intuitively. It becomes important for us now to find ways to help students know this—to help them demonstrate their knowledge through writing but also to show them that writing can enhance the learning process.

At the Writing Matters @ KU monthly meetings we explore ideas and formulate questions about the ways we prepare student writers at KU. Your experiences with and views on student writing can help shape the future of academic writers—join us.

Notes:

1 Writing Matters @KU meeting notes and related documents: http://www.writing.ku.edu/writingmatters/
Technology tools for student writers

Susan Zvacek, IDS

Given the substantial body of research supporting student writing, few people would question the value of expecting students to express themselves and demonstrate their learning through writing. The real issue is how to do this without sending your workload (and that of your students) through the roof. Fortunately, several readily available tools can help with this goal.

**Word Processing:** When students submit papers electronically via e-mail, in the online dropbox in Blackboard, or in a course folder in Outlook, not only can you conveniently store students' work (no more worries about losing a hardcopy assignment), but you can also use many handy features for grading. One that is especially helpful is the “Comment” feature that allows the reader to insert a text message—in a sort of “sticky note” fashion—within a student's paper. When the student mouses over the comment icon, the note pops up. The really great part is that standard messages you’ve created can be pasted into these comment boxes, a real time-saver if you find yourself making similar comments on multiple papers.

Another feature in most word processors is the ability to track changes, which enables a second writer (whether a teacher or co-author) to make changes to the text that show up in another color, making them easy to spot. They aren’t permanent edits until they've been “accepted” by the original writer, however. This can be an especially handy feature for peer editing of papers or group projects that involve writing, two instructional strategies that can reduce the amount of instructor work but still give students practice with their writing skills.

Word processing has also reduced the labor-intensity of writing papers in the first place, so expecting more than one iteration of an assignment is no great hardship for students. This has the added advantage of alleviating the problem of papers purchased online or “borrowed” from other students. By requiring that students submit successive drafts of their assignment, not only will the final result be improved, but also it’s unlikely that student will purchase papers only to deconstruct them to fulfill this requirement.

**Online Discussions:** In most Web-based environments, we’re known by how we present ourselves in writing. Although much of the writing we do online is informal in nature, it provides excellent practice in explaining an idea, arguing a point or presenting evidence. Requiring students to participate in online discussions, whether using Blackboard or some other option, levels the playing field of classroom debate by allowing everyone an opportunity to present their views. For larger classes, where reading hundreds of discussion postings per week quickly becomes unmanageable, one option is to have students engage in online discussions within smaller groups. A group representative then posts a statement to the whole class forum that contains the agreed-upon response of the group’s members.

**Online Chat:** Although the writing seen in real-time chats is typically quite informal, it also can provide an opportunity for students to express themselves in writing. Some ways of using this tool include test review sessions or online office hours, where students are free to “drop in” and participate, or not. More structured sessions (with required attendance, possibly) might include discussion questions posed by the instructor who then “calls on” students to respond, or sessions in which students are expected to lead the discussion on a specific topic.

Using any of these techniques to increase student writing requires only some advance planning and a clear sense of the desired outcomes. Whether you want your students to refine their writing by doing multiple drafts of their work, or whether you simply want them to practice writing more, there are tools to help you and your students. For more information on any of these strategies, contact Instructional Development and Support at 864-2600 or ids@ku.edu.
Department Teaching Award finalists announced

Last fall, the advisory board for CTE named four finalists for the 2004 Department Excellence in Teaching Award: chemical and petroleum engineering, geology, Germanic languages and literature, and Spanish and Portuguese. Chairs of these departments have been invited to submit a portfolio to represent their department’s work in detail.

CTE’s advisory board will review portfolios and name the recipient of the $8,000 award in April. The award will be presented at the KU Summit next August.

Each year, CTE honors one department for its contributions to KU’s teaching mission. Awards alternate between large and small departments. The program’s purpose is to support the development of department cultures that advocate effective teaching. The award process gathers examples of innovative, collaborative and effective intra-departmental initiatives, honors those that are well developed, and shares them with other departments to further their development of teaching programs.

The level of achievement by KU teachers is quite high. The CTE board considers the following areas to distinguish among the accomplishments of the very best:

- Department-wide faculty cooperation to create and nurture programs or initiatives that connect faculty members in support of teaching and learning;
- Broadly based reflection on and consideration of the department’s teaching goals and objectives, including examples of goals for student understanding that reflect meaningful connections among courses;
- Recent innovations and sustained, department-wide efforts to implement the department’s educational vision, including descriptions of how the vision and teaching practices have been refined through examination of their results.

Faculty to participate in CTE seminar and fellowships, receive Teaching Grants

For the spring 2004 semester, CTE’s advisory board has named the following faculty as participants in these programs:

**Faculty Seminar:** Susan King, health, sport and exercise sciences; Michael Murray and Jeff Olafsen, physics and astronomy; and Holly Storkel, speech-language-hearing. These faculty members will join together to read and review accounts of university teaching and explore ways to represent the intellectual work they do in teaching. Each will receive a $1,000 instructional fund for support.

**Faculty Fellows:** Paul Atchley, psychology; Sheryle Gallant, psychology; and Joann Keyton, communication studies. These faculty have identified a learning goal for their students that they wish them to achieve, and they will explore ways of enhancing their teaching to reach that learning goal. Each will receive $1,500 for support. Atchley will initiate the development of an online course in Professional Issues in Psychology, to provide students with a goal-directed context for their coursework and extra-curricular work related to their major. Gallant will develop a portion of her Theories of Personality course on DVD format for students to review outside of class, to allow course content to be delivered in virtual mode and real-time class meetings reserved for engagement with students in in-depth dialogue and discussion. Keyton will bring more authentic diversity to her Organizational Communication course by taping interviews with workers who will speak for themselves about their experiences in the real work force. Keyton will share these videos with students in her class.

**Teaching Grants:** Elissa Armstrong, design; David Besson, physics and astronomy; Catherine Crisp; social welfare; Sarah Hargus Ferguson, speech-language-hearing; Donald Haider-Markel, political science; and Mark Thompson, health, sport and exercise sciences. Award amounts varied; as many proposals as possible were funded.
Seven ways to streamline grading students’ writing

As noted on page 1, writing can be an integral part of students’ engagement in our classes and a key means for them to learn course material. Is it possible to have students write more and learn more from their writing without adding hours of grading to our workload? Susan Zvacek shares some ideas on page 6. Here are seven more, taken from Walvoord and Anderson’s book, *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*.

1. **First, be sure that assignments and tests assess the learning you and your students want to achieve.**
   If you don’t take this step, you’ll waste your time and your students’ time. Begin by identifying what you want students to learn. Choose assignments that teach and test the learning you value most. Develop a course outline that shows the nature and sequence of student work. Finally, check that assignments fit your goals and are feasible for your workload (p. 17).

2. **Use rubrics** (a.k.a. primary trait analyses). These help you have clear criteria and standards for grading which can save you time grading, allow you to make that process consistent and fair, help you explain to students what you expect, help students know what to aim for, and save you from having to justify grades to students (p. 65). Contact Judy Eddy at jedddy@ku.edu for a handout on how to develop a rubric.

3. **Don’t grade every writing assignment.** Coaches don’t critique every shot that a basketball player makes; teachers don’t have to grade every writing assignment. But do give students credit for assignments they do.

4. **Ask students to organize their work for your efficiency.** Walvoord and Anderson state, “Ask yourself, Where do I waste time in the physical or logistical aspects of grading? Can you instruct students to organize their work for your efficiency? For example, do you hunt through students’ papers to see whether all the parts are present? If so, how about requiring a table of contents? Do you have to search for pages caught under someone else’s paper clip? Ban paper clips” (p. 129).

5. **Use only as many grade levels as you need.** The traditional grading system (including pluses and minuses) is a 13-level system. Can you use a six-level system (A through F) or something simpler instead? The fewer the levels, the faster you can grade (p. 122).

6. **Distribute your time efficiently.** The authors suggest that teachers “spend enough time to make a thoughtful, professional judgment with reasonable consistency, then move on. There are other aspects of student learning that need your time” (p. 11–12).

7. **Make your grading time count by taking a surgical approach, rather than performing an autopsy.** “Put your time into comments that reach students in a teachable moment,” advise Walvoord and Anderson. “Often, a teachable moment is when there is still something the student can do to improve the grade on a live assignment. Comments on drafts or on works in progress are likely to be more worthwhile than extensive comments on final work” (p. 123). It’s a better use of your time to comment on drafts rather than final papers.