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## A Response to Back to the Future?

Donna Vinton  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## **A Response to Back to the Future?**

Donna Vinton

Engage in a conversation with faculty on the topic of student writing, and it is not uncommon to hear complaints about the level of skill they are seeing in student work. I could not agree more strongly with Grant's assertion that developing students' skills in writing cannot be limited to a single course, remedial or otherwise, which students are required to take as part of their college coursework. If we want students to learn to write well and develop as writers, experiences in writing need to be integrated throughout the curriculum. How can institutions of higher education go about working to create better writing? I would suggest two things—first, department-wide and campus-wide conversations about writing and second, faculty development resources to provide strategies for incorporating writing into coursework and providing students with feedback on their writing.

So what would be the focus of conversations about writing? Two interrelated topics could be of use, an examination of what we know about student writing and an overall discussion of how faculty are approaching writing in their classrooms, no matter what their discipline might be.

What do we know about student writing? While every faculty member can provide anecdotal data about good—or more often, poor—writing by their students, data providing specific evidence about student writing is available. As part of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) administered in 2009 and 2010, colleges have had the opportunity to participate in the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College,<sup>1</sup> which presents students with 25 questions related to their experiences with writing. The following are examples of what the 2010 survey showed about writing for seniors at the University of Northern Iowa:

- Thirty-three percent reported that most or all of their assignments required them to argue a position using evidence and reasoning; thirty-two percent reported that few or none of their assignments did so.
- Forty percent reported that most or all of their assignments require them to write in the style and format of a specific field; over a third of seniors reported that few or none of their assignments ask them to do so.
- Twenty-eight percent reported receiving feedback from a classmate, friend or family member about a draft before turning in a final assignment; thirty-nine percent of seniors did so for few or no assignments.
- Seventy-one percent reported that for most or all of their writing assignments their instructors explained in advance the criteria that would be used in grading their



assignment; twenty-four percent reported that for most or all of their assignments their instructors provided a sample of a completed assignment written by the instructor or a student.

Conversations among faculty related to data such as that offered above can lead to questions related to topics such as what kinds of writing instruction a faculty member can be expected to provide in courses outside the fields of English and rhetoric; what kinds of writing faculty are asking students to do and what other kinds of assignments they might use; what kinds and levels of writing skills will be required for graduate study and/or employment in their field; and how faculty can incorporate writing into their courses and provide useful feedback to students, when they may already feel overloaded with teaching, research, and service obligations.

Among positive outcomes of such conversations might be clarification of complaints related to student writing and expectations for student writing and the identification of existing sources of support and resources and of specific needs for faculty development related to the incorporation of writing into discipline-based courses. The need for faculty development related to incorporating writing more effectively into undergraduate classes can be illustrated by a personal experience with the use of writing in a variety of secondary and postsecondary courses.

I started grading student writing as an undergraduate employee for the English department at the University of Northern Iowa at a time when the required general education composition classes were frequently taught in large sections and students were hired and trained to provide comments and grades for student papers. Student theme graders, as we were called, were taught a very thorough approach to grading the student compositions, with comments and marks both within the paper and at its end related to organization, content, and grammar. As might be supposed, such an approach was very time-consuming. I carried this style of grading written work into my first job, teaching high school English, and was constantly grading papers and feeling guilty about not getting papers returned soon enough or grading them thoroughly enough.

By the time I started teaching courses at the University of Northern Iowa, I had learned about using rubrics to help with grading written assignments, and students reported that the rubrics were useful. When I surveyed students in two different semesters of the same graduate class, 100% of the students in both classes reported that the rubrics were useful or very useful. Despite this positive reception of my use of rubrics as a means of providing both feedback and explanation of expectations for assignments, my training in evaluating writing and my teaching style still made me feel the need to provide additional personal, specific comments to students' writing, so providing feedback remained time-consuming.



Now, decades after I started teaching, I have learned some new techniques. I started to use color highlighting to emphasize selected parts of the rubrics I was using, green highlighting meaning “You are doing this”; yellow meaning “This is an area needing improvement.” After I started using this approach, several e-mails to the listserv for Professional and Organizational Development, POD, directed toward faculty and faculty developers, noted other ways to use color<sup>2</sup>. Then recently, I read an article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on using text expansion software as a way of providing students with detailed comments by typing just a few key words<sup>3</sup>. The survey questions used by the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College, noted above, suggests another strategy—having students provide feedback to each other on their writing, which is time-effective for the instructor and extends the audience for student writing beyond the instructor.

My point is that there are strategies that can make the process of evaluating and providing feedback on student writing less onerous, but faculty need to know they exist and experiment with using them in their classrooms. Similarly, faculty may benefit from assistance with creating different kinds of writing assignments that will both relate to their discipline and help students develop needed skills in writing and ways to provide students with writing instruction that does not take undue time away from the content of the course. Assistance to faculty, on whatever topics related to incorporating writing into courses outside of those focused on the development of writing skills, could come from a faculty development center, from workshops offered by faculty from the English department and/or professional staff from the Writing Center on campus, or even from faculty within departments sharing what they have found to work for them.

If we are serious about increasing student skills in writing, we need to examine what we know about student writing, what we are doing related to writing and why, and how to make writing across students’ educational experience more productive—and more possible. If we do not do so, student writing will not improve, and we will likely continue to complain about student writing and hope that someone outside of our department or courses will take care of the problem for us.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://comppile.org/wpa+nsse/>, retrieved October 2, 2010

<sup>2</sup> See Patrick B. Sullivan and Ed Nuhfer postings for September 10, 2010, available in the POD archives at <https://listserv.nd.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A0=POD> using “Color of comments on student writing” as the search term.

<sup>3</sup> George H. Williams, “Using Text Expansion to Respond to Student Writing,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 23, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Using-Text-Expansion-software/27119>, retrieved September 30, 2010.