Using Writing
to Promote Active Learning
and Foster Community

Presented by Dr. Christine Martorana, WAC consultant

Introductions

- Name and Department/Discipline
- Course title and brief description of the course you are focusing on for Project THINC course redesign
- What is one specific thing **you enjoy** about teaching and/or working with students?

Quick free-write

Take a few minutes and respond to one or more of the following questions. There is no right/wrong answer here, and no pressure. Just jot down what comes to mind. You can keep your responses to yourself or put them in the Zoom chat.

1. What does active learning in the classroom mean to you?
2. What does a healthy, engaged classroom community look like to you?
3. What are some some of the ways in which you promote active learning and/or foster a healthy, engaged community in your classes?

Note: This activity is an example of an active learning strategy called "Think, Pair, Share." In a larger class setting, you could give students several questions like this (related to your course) to THINK about and write down their thoughts. Then, put them in PAIRS and ask them to discuss similarities/differences among their ideas. Finally, come back together as a class to SHARE responses.

Workshop overview

1. Active learning
   a. How can we use **low-stakes writing** to facilitate active learning?

2. Classroom community
   a. How can we use **discussions** to further facilitate active learning and promote an engaged community?

3. Time to work on materials for your own course redesigns

What is active learning?

- Learning in which students are ACTIVELY involved in their own learning
- Hands-on, participatory approach to teaching and learning
- Compared to passive learning, where students are expected to only listen, watch, and/or read and absorb the information

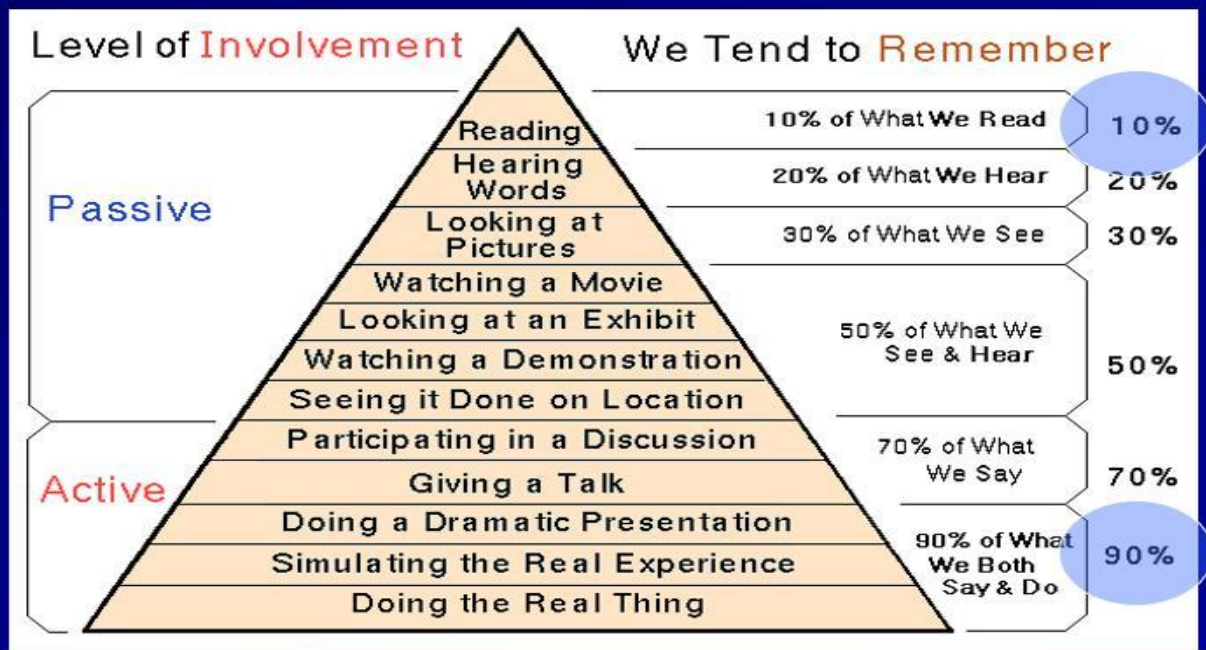Active learning is "anything that involves students in **doing things** and **thinking about** the things they are doing" (Bonwell et al. 1991).

Source: Dale, E. (1969). *Audiovisual Methods in Teaching* (3rd Edition). Holt, Rinehart & Winston: New York, NY.

One approach to active learning: **Writing to Learn**

Writing to Learn activities are most often **low-stakes writing tasks** designed to help students use writing to think through and explore main concepts or key ideas.

Low-stakes writing	Formal writing (high-stakes)
Frequent throughout unit and/or semester	Less frequent
Smaller in size/length	More substantial in size/length
Can be used to work towards bigger projects	Usually the bigger project of a unit or of the course
Independent and/or collaborative	Independent and/or collaborative
Can be shared with class	Can be shared with class
Sometimes not collected by instructor	Most often collected by instructor
Ungraded or grade carries low weight	Graded; grade carries more weight

Writing to Learn activities offer many benefits, including:

- Helping build students' confidence and comfort level with writing
- Encouraging students to brainstorm and explore ideas
- Focusing students on the topic/issue at hand
- Promoting critical thinking
- Helping instructors assess students' understanding of course material
- Establishing trust between students and instructor (especially when instructor responds to ideas/content as if it is a dialogue or exploration rather than a graded piece of writing)

On the following slides,
we will look at some example low-stakes writing activities.

You will receive a link to these Google Slides so you can use and/or adapt the activities. (This also means we won't read each one in detail right now…)

Think, Pair, Share

For homework, ask students to read/watch an assigned text (an article, chapter, video, etc.).

During class, begin ask students to **THINK** about a specific part of the text. (For example: "What are 2-3 specific things you learned about _____ from reading the assigned chapter?") Students write down their responses.

Then, **PAIR** students and give them a certain amount of time to **SHARE** their writing with one another. Depending on class size, student group sizes might range from 2-5 students.

When you bring everyone back to the entire class, you can expand the small group discussions into an entire class discussion.

Group notes on Google Slides *in response to a text*

Create a Google Slides presentation and share the link with your class. Be sure to set the access so that anyone with the link can edit the slides. Then...

1. Read/watch a text together at the start of your class or ask students come to class having already read/watched the assigned text.
2. Post several discussion questions on the Google Slides and give students time to add their responses to the Slides.
3. Display the Google Slides to view as a class and discuss the notes/ideas shared there.

An example from my own course is provided on the following slide so that you can see the written instructions I provided to the students.

Prompt on the first slide:

Group note taking...

As we read pages 159-161 together, think about the following three questions.

1. What is Muted Group Theory?
2. Who does it impact?
3. What are some strategies muted groups can use to challenge this silencing?

These questions are posted on the following 3 slides and we are going to use these slides for group notes. While we read, you can add your thoughts about each question to the appropriate slide. You will also have about 10 minutes after we're done reading to post to the slides.

This slide was followed by 3 more Google Slides, each one with a question at the top and space for students to type their responses.

In order to facilitate class discussion about the text, keep the following tips in mind as you write the discussion questions:

1. Allowing students to type their responses on the Google Slides without signing their names can encourage everyone to participate, even the shy ones who do not often speak aloud in discussions.
2. Write questions that ask students to move beyond yes/no responses and connect their responses to personal experiences and/or real-life scenarios.
3. Include questions that ask for content knowledge/text comprehension and also questions that allow for personal responses/perspectives.
4. Let students know they can respond to any/all of the questions.

For example, discussion questions in Niurca's class might look like...

1. According to the video, why are universities and research labs in the USA beginning to explore treatments that lie outside the normative practice of Western medicine? *(Content understanding)*
2. What are your personal reactions to this trend? What questions and/or uncertainties does this evoke for you? *(Personal reactions)*
3. If you were/are a parent to a young child with a disease, would you be open to exploring the potential for shamans, animals and/or plants to treat your child? Why or why not? *(Application to future/different scenario)*

Group notes on Google Slides *in response to a larger assignment/project*

Follow a similar set up as discussed in the previous example; however, this time instead of asking students to respond to a text, you are asking them to respond to an assignment or project that you recently introduced (initial reactions, clarification questions, etc.)

The goal here is to give students space to respond to/process the assignment, ask questions, and share initial thoughts/brainstorms. This can also be a way for you to gauge student understanding of the assignment.

For example, discussion questions in response to an assignment might look like…

1. What do you think will be the most interesting part of this project? Why?
2. What do you think will be the most challenging part of this project? Why?
3. What questions do you have about this project? (No question is too small or silly. If you have this question, chances are someone else does too!)
4. How do you see this project fitting in to our course as a whole?
5. What are some topics you are initially considering for this project?

Take a position

Step 1. Write a position statement related to the content you're covering. This position statement should express a specific stance on an issue related to your course. (Example: The United States should make English its official language.)

Step 2: Share the position statement with your students, asking them to choose which of the phrases best describes their feelings on the statement: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. (If you want to display the results in real time, you might use the Polling feature on Zoom or Kahoot so you can project student responses on a screen.)

Step 3: Share a Google Doc with the entire class. Put the above 4 phrases on the Google Doc and then give students 10 minutes to contribute to the Google Doc. Ask them to write down justifications/reasoning in support of the stance they chose and then discuss as a class. (Or, you could ask students to free-write about their reasoning on their own paper.) Either way, use the student writing to spark class discussion.

Pre-class questionnaire

In a class that will be discussion-based, ask students to respond to the following b*efore class*. Depending on your class, you might have them submit their responses on Canvas or bring their responses with them to class.

a.   In your own words, explain the topic we will be discussing in class.
b.   List the various perspectives/viewpoints that might come up in this discussion.
c.   Select one of these viewpoints that you support and explain which one you've chosen.
d.   Explain your reasoning for supporting this viewpoint. Do you fully or partially support it?
e.   Write at least one question you have for someone who embraces a different viewpoint.

Further ideas…

● Ask students to use "e" above as discussion questions for one another.
● Ask students to do a brief free-write at the end of the class explaining if their responses to "c" and "d" have changed at all as a result of the class. If so, explain the change. If not, explain why their beliefs have remained consistent.

Bookend the class with writing

Students write for a few minutes both at the beginning and end of a class session. At the beginning, they might summarize the key points from the preceding class or from assigned homework. At the end of class students might write briefly about a question such as:

- What one idea that we talked about today most interested you and why?
- What was the clearest point we made today? What was the foggiest point?
- What do you still not understand about the concept we've been discussing?
- If you had to restate the concept in your own terms, how would you do that?
- How does today's discussion build on yesterday's?

Such questions can provide continuity from class to class, but they can also give teachers a quick glimpse into how well the class materials are getting across. You could use the responses written at the end of class to begin the next class.

To facilitate the collection of responses, you can 1) open a submission spot on Canvas, or 2) use Google Forms, similar to this example "Exit Ticket."

Believing, Doubting, and Debating

This writing activity calls for students to write briefly in two 5-minute chunks, engage in a debate, and then conclude with another brief free-write.

- **5 minutes:** Ask students to put aside personal biases or perspectives and write points/arguments *in support* of an idea, concept, or thesis related to your course. During this 5 minutes, students defend the idea as if they fully support it.
- **5 minutes:** Similar to the prompt above, ask students to write points/arguments in opposition to the idea, concept, or thesis.
- **10-15 minutes:** Break the class into two groups. One group uses their free-writes to prepare a cohesive argument *in support* of the idea and the other group prepares an argument *opposed* to the idea.
- Come back together as a class and give each group time to present their argument.
- After each group presents their argument, they then have the chance to ask questions of the other group's position, offer rebuttals, and defend their stance.
- **5 minutes:** Ask each student to write individually about their own opinions/perspectives now after having completed this activity. What is their individual stance? What is at least one new perspective or idea that they gained during this activity that they had not previously considered?

Topic exploration

Ask students to find two current sources (news articles, webpages, documentaries) on a single event/topic. Then, for each of the sources, students respond to the following:

1. Create a Venn diagram in which you identify the main points/ideas from each source. The middle part of the diagram should highlight similarities between the sources.
2. What is one specific connection you can make between the information within the Venn diagram and your personal, cultural, academic, and/or professional life?

Game of Thrones
- Political intrigue
- Long tangents that world build but have no meaning in the plot
- R+L=J
- Descriptions of food
- Zombies

(middle)
- Dragons
- Lots of backstory we don't see effecting current events
- Popular book series with no new releases since 2008.
- Source of outdated memes
- Magic… maybe?
- Annoying blond boy that "rules" that everyone hates
- Child protagonists
- Several offshoot media from the main storyline.
- Key plotlines abandoned for the movie/TV show.
- David Bradley

Harry Potter
- Short chapters
- Little school work for a that takes place in a school.
- Characters with redeeming qualities.
- Themes of hope against all odds
- Centaurs

Class discussions

In addition to Writing to Learn activities, class discussions are effective ways to further facilitate active learning and promote an engaged community within your classroom.
- **Active learning:** students post and explore their own ideas/responses
- **Engaged community:** students respond to one another and learn from one another

Three types we'll look at ---
1. In class (live) discussions
2. Online discussions to build/sustain community
3. Online discussions to facilitate student learning

As you'll see, these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Sample in-class (live) discussion format #1

The following discussion could take place after students read/view an assigned text. Begin by asking students to first write down their responses to the following 5 questions (either before class or at the start of class) and then use the questions to guide a class discussion. Take notes on the board as students speak. Or, following the individual writing time, you could split the class into small groups and ask them to share their responses with one another. Give each group a few minutes to report some of their main ideas back to the whole class before having a full class discussion.

1. What comes to mind when you think of (topic)?
2. Where do you see it happening? How has it affected your life?
3. Do you think it is an important issue? Why/why not?
4. From what you've read or experienced, what are the pros and cons of (topic)?
5. In your opinion, what is one of the most important or interesting ideas from the assigned text? Why do you think this?

Sample in-class (live) discussion format #2

This in-class discussion begins with a 3-part individual free-write.

Recall   +   Evaluate/Create   +   Explain

Recall course content (something you read, a topic you've discussed, etc.)

**Offer a judgment, critique, evaluation
OR
Extend, build off of, or create something new**

Explain and/or support the evaluation/creation

1. **Recall:** Write 3-4 sentences about (course content), referencing at least one of the texts we've read.
2. **Evaluate/Create:** Choose one of the ideas you wrote about in Step 1 and offer a critique of this idea OR build on this idea by adding a different thought/perspective
3. **Explain:** In 3-4 sentences, explain in more detail what you wrote in Step 2.

Online discussions to build community

1. During the first week of the course, ask students to complete an "Introduce Yourself" discussion board. You can include an introductory discussion prompt on Canvas [like this one](#) or you could use a video platform such as FlipGrid. [This is an example from one of my recent classes.](#)

2. Create a Q&A discussion board where students can post course-related questions for the class (i.e., Where can I find this text? What did our professor mean by this…?) Remind students that if they have a "silly" question, chances are someone else has that same question. (Note: you can keep an eye on this, but refrain from responding immediately. Let the students respond to one another; if no one responds in a few days, you can chime in and/or point them in the right direction.)

3. Create a "Student Lounge" discussion board where students can share relevant resources, post about FIU happenings, and/or acknowledge help they've received from their peers.

Sample Canvas discussion prompt: The QCC

After completing the assigned readings for the week, post your QCC by **DATE/TIME.** Each QCC should be at least 300 words and include three parts: **Q**uestion, **C**omment, and **C**onnection.

- A **Q**uestion prompted by the readings; this might be a discussion question for the class or a question about something you did not fully understand. Here, you should reference at least one specific part of the reading that has sparked this question. You can include a direct quote or a paraphrase, and the quote or paraphrase should be cited with the author's name and page number.
- A **C**omment on how some of the ideas presented in the readings has impacted your understanding of _____. Here, you should describe the specific part(s) of the readings that changed your perspective, introduced an idea that was new to you, or challenged what you had previously thought.
- A **C**onnection to one or more of the ideas presented in the weekly lecture notes. Here, you should make it clear which of the specific idea(s) from the PPT you have chosen to respond to.

In addition to your initial post, you also need to post a QCC response to at least one other person's QCC. Your QCC response should be posted as a reply to another person's QCC by **DATE/TIME.** Your response should provide a potential answer to their question, respond to their comment with your own perspectives and understanding, and/or add to the connection they shared. When you choose a peer to respond to, please choose someone who does not yet have a response for that week.

The QCC adaptation

Below is an adaptation of the QCC, developed by FIU's Ana Menendez

QQQs on the Readings: The Quarantine QQQ prompts you engage actively with your reading. The format gives you an opportunity to question, quibble with and quote from the course readings. We will complete an average of two QQQ each week during the first half of the course. Each QQQ should be at least 200 words and include three parts: Question, Quibble, and Quote. In each Q, you will reference one specific part of the reading that has sparked this Q. Each Q should include either a direct quote or a paraphrase cited by author name and page number.

- A **Question** prompted by the readings; this might be a discussion question for the class or a question about something you did not fully understand. These are not "scavenger hunt" questions ("What did the author say was his favorite color?")– but rather should be questions that emerge out of the reading and demonstrate engagement and understanding.
- A **Quibble** with some point that you don't quite agree with or would have liked the author to clarify and why.
- A **Quote** from the readings that resonates with you and why.

Sample Canvas discussion prompt: sharing sources

- In a course where students are working with sources to learn about and/or research a topic, create a discussion board that asks them to share one of the sources they have found. Not only does this help students explore their sources in a low-stakes way, but it also facilitates dialogue throughout the class and, if students are working on similar topics, they might benefit from see sources that others have found.
- Along with the source, ask students to post their response to the following:
  - What are the main ideas expressed within this source? Summarize the source for your peers, assuming they have never read/viewed the source.
  - What is one thing this source helps you to better understand about your topic?
  - After reading/viewing this source, what is one question you have about your topic?
  - Would you recommend this source to someone else in the class who is focusing on a similar topic as you? Why or why not?

Sample Canvas discussion prompt: the Different Perspective approach

Use the discussion board to ask students to think about a topic from a different perspective.

- **From an instructor perspective:** Ask students to create their own exam questions based on an assigned text or content covered in the course. In this discussion post, students need to share their exam question, explain what parts of the text/course they used to create this question, and why they think this is an important exam question to include. Peer responses could then offer potential answers to the suggested exam questions.
- **From a book editor perspective:** Ask students to argue for/against a particular text to be included in a future version of the course textbook. In this discussion post, students need to clearly state their position, explain why they think the text should or should not be included, and make specific connections to both the text and the course goals.

Sample Canvas discussion prompt: the Re-Presentation approach

Give a discussion prompt that asks students to re-present an assigned text or course material in a different format or genre. This approach offers a way for students to illustrate their understanding of a text/concept and further solidify their understanding.

- Create an infographic for a general public audience on therapeutic touch, a form of alternative medicine in which the healer is to start therapeutic changes in the patient's energy field by moving his/her hands slightly above the patient's body.
- Imagine a dialogue/debate: ask students to imagine that supporters and attackers of the practice of therapeutic touch are coming together in a debate. What main ideas would each side share and emphasize? How might they respond to one another? In what specific ways might they challenge one another? Use reasons and evidence based on the professional literature.

Sample Canvas discussion prompt: reflective writing prompts

At the end of a project, use a discussion board for students to reflect on their experiences with the project.

- **Approach 1 (focuses on the student's process):** Ask them to reflect on their time management, research strategies, where/when they did most of their work, their drafting process, if they used any outside resources for help (your office hours, the Writing Center, etc.), what they found challenging and/or enjoyable about the project. Ask them to reflect on what parts of this experience worked well for them and what they could change for next time.
- **Approach 2 (focuses on the student's perspectives):** Give the following sentence starters and ask students to choose 2-3 for their discussion post. They should complete the sentence and then write an explanation that offers some detail about each sentence. • I changed my attitude about… • I am more aware of… • I was surprised about… • I felt… • I related to… • I empathized with…

Sample Canvas discussion prompt: reflective writing prompts continued

- This prompt follows **the Kolb experiential learning cycle**: Objective / Reflective / Interpretive / Decisional.
  - First, students **objectively** reflect on a learning experience, describing what they did, observed, and/or read.
  - Second, they **reflect** next on how they felt, what they were reminded of, how this connects with their values and/or previous experiences, and other "affective" questions.
  - Third, students **interpret** the learning by explaining how the experience impacted their thinking.
  - Fourth, students are asked about future **decisions**: how did the learning affect their skills or understanding? What will change for them in the future in terms of action, perspectives, and/or understanding?

Adapted from Clemson reflection activities

Sample Canvas discussion prompt: reflective writing prompts continued

- **Reflection in song:** Ask students to find a song where the singer uses lyrics that describe what he/she feels about a particular project, assignment, or the course. Tell students it could be an entire song or a lyric in a song. They can post their song to the Canvas discussion board (the lyrics or a link) and write an explanation of why they selected this particular song as a representation of how they are feeling about the project, assignment, or course.
  - Note: The above prompt could be adapted so that students identify something besides a song - a piece of artwork, a poem, a dance performance, etc.

Reflection time *(aka using writing to promote active learning!)*

Using the Zoom chat feature, share with our group one of the previously discussed activities that you are interested in trying/adapting for your class. What do you find interesting about this activity or applicable to your specific course? What about the activity might you change or adapt, if anything?

(A list of the activities we've discussed is included on the next slide for your reference.)

Activities we discussed...

Low-stakes writing
Think, Pair, Share
Group notes on Google Slides
Take a Position
Pre-class questionnaire
Bookend the class with writing
Believing, Doubting, and Debating
Topic Exploration

Class discussions
Beginning a discussion with guided reflective writing
Recall + Evaluate/Create + Explain
Introductory discussion board
Q&A board or "Student Lounge" board
QCC or QQQ
Sharing Sources discussion board
The Different Perspective approach
The Re-Presentation approach
Reflective prompts (on student process; on student perspectives; using Kolb experiential learning; reflection in song)

Using Zoom to promote active learning

Poll feature: create single choice or multiple choice questions for students to respond to during your live class meetings; can be a way for students to express opinions/thoughts on a given topic and see how they compare to their peers; Polling for meetings – Zoom Help Center (helpful link with How-To info)

Share screen feature: use the share screen feature to watch a brief video or TED Talk as a class and then follow up with one of the previously referenced Writing to Learn activities; Sharing Computer Sound During Screen Sharing – Zoom Help Center (helpful link with information on sharing screen and audio on Zoom)

Breakout rooms: create individual Zoom rooms for small groups to work together; Enabling breakout rooms (helpful link with steps on how to set up these rooms); you can manually assign breakout rooms or have Zoom randomly divide the students.

Workshop time

You will receive a link to the Google Slides for your reference during this workshop time. Suggestions for how you might use this time:

1. Choose one or more of the low-stakes activities or discussion prompts and personalize it for your course.
2. Look at the activities/assignments you've already written for this course and consider how you might revise it so that it promotes active learning or fosters community.
3. Consider how one of the assignments might be a recurring assignment in your course - a signature teaching activity. For example, Ana uses the QQQ in this way, just as I have with the QCC.
4. Look at your course as a whole and consider where it could be good to include a reflective writing activity.
5. Consider ways you can break a larger assignment up into smaller assignments/chunks to facilitate an active learning approach.
6. Discuss and ask questions with one another.

Resources

- FIU Writing Across the Curriculum faculty
  - Dr. Kimberly Harrison (harrisok@fiu.edu) - Director of WAC
  - Dr. Ming Fang (mifang@fiu.edu) - Associate Director of WAC
  - Dr. Christine Martorana (cmartora@fiu.edu) - WAC Consultant
- FIU WAC website
- Subscribe to our listserv by emailing wac@fiu.edu and letting us know you'd like to receive updates about WAC events and resources
- WAC Clearinghouse