

WORKING UP SOMETHING TO SAY

Sequencing Low-Stakes
Writing Assignments To
Produce a High-Stakes Project

Richard C. Burke

Lynchburg College
burke@lynchburg.edu
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Quick outline

1. The challenges
2. A way of meeting the challenges
3. How to work with Low-Stakes Writing
4. Samples of LSW assignments
5. Responding to the assignments
6. Sequencing Low-Stakes assignments

The Challenges

The instructor's challenge

- getting students to be active learners

Faculty ought to provide

- guidance
- support
- feedback

In short . . .

We need to find ways to get our students involved in the sorts of academic activities that we believe to be at the heart of a life of intellectual engagement.

Importance to first-year students

- first-year courses introduce a student to
 - what being a college student entails
 - studying at an appropriate level
 - thinking about thinking
 - the idea of learning as inquiry and discovery
 - the process of working on complex assignments

A Way of Meeting the Challenges

What *won't* work?

- quizzes and additional tests
- additional long, formal essays
- faith that students are making progress

To meet these goals, students must

- read
- think
- explore
- articulate

Solution:

Low-Stakes Writing Assignments

- brief, informal writing assignments
- designed to stimulate
 - thinking
 - self-reflection
 - engagement
 - academic risk-taking
- with most attention paid to the quality of the thinking rather than mechanical correctness

Low-Stakes vs. High-Stakes

■ Low

- brief
- informal
- narrow
- exploratory
- *writing to learn*
- quickly graded and/or commented on

■ High

- longish
- formal, mechanically correct
- relatively broad
- demonstrate what writer has learned
- carefully corrected and graded

Low-Risk = Liberty

without penalizing them for making errors that would count in high stakes writing situations.

http://www.wip.uga.edu/policies_guidelines.htm

Example from sociology

- You will be attending a lecture by a visiting professor, who will be discussing effects of social stratification on access to college. Afterwards, write one carefully crafted sentence that clearly and fully states what the lecturer specifically meant when using the phrase “social stratification.”

probably good used early in an introductory course

From business

- Read “Motivating Mid-Level Employees in Tough Times,” paying particular attention to the authors’ discussion of employee morale. Based on what you have already read and learned regarding morale

Possible follow up for the following class:
How would you revise any one of the article’s recommendations in order to take these matters into account?

overlooked.

From computer science

- Read pp. 356-61 in your textbook on programming for fuzzy logic. Then, write a one-page response to one of the following:
 - How does this process represent a departure from what you have learned before?
 - Is there another way to achieve the same end, and if so, what advantages does the new process offer the programmer?
 - At what point did you find yourself getting lost and why?

Let's consider a sample

- In *Bat Boy: The Musical*, how do you explain the fact that Shelley and her mother both love Edgar, the bat child?



How do you explain . . .

1

- Edgar is the bat boy who is found in a cave outside of Hope Falls, West Virginia. He is brought to the home of Dr. Parker, a veterinarian, who has a wife (Mercedith) (Shelley). At first, it is thought that the bat boy will be treated as a wild, unwanted animal and put down, but eventually, both Shelley and her mother come to love Edgar. This becomes a problem when both the village and Dr. Parker himself decide that Edgar is a danger both to children and to cows.

How do you explain . . .

2

- Most people in Hope Falls find Edgar repulsive and dangerous, so the love that Shelley and her mother feel for him comes as a real surprise. But that fact offers one explanation for *why* Shelley falls for him: the thrill of the forbidden. Or the appeal of being willingly on the outside, separating themselves from the more ordinary citizens. Those citizens, including Shelley's father, are dull, narrow, and bigoted, and Edgar represents an alternative. Of course, he is both sweet and smart as well. But there's no denying that he is strange looking. And strange behaving,

Lots of things to notice here

- requires thinking about what happens in the play **and why**
- not just one correct answer
- plenty of room for exploring and for showing insight
- a weak answer is easily identifiable as such
- writer hasn't gotten to the end of the play

Benefits to students

- normally read the material before class
- *engage* with the material, think critically about it
- get regular, low-stress writing practice
- are safe to take risks, be adventuresome
- get frequent and regular feedback from instructors
- have opportunities to “find their own language for the issues of the course” (Peter Elbow)

Benefits to instructors

- see how students are responding to their readings and other assignments
- can tell who's doing the work and who isn't
- discover where students are encountering difficulties
- see how students are thinking, who's floundering, what is exciting and provoking them
- have classes in which students are well prepared to participate

This is **writing to learn**

- students must **work to make sense** of what they've read for the class and to articulate their understanding

This is **writing to learn**

- *not* writing “to communicate . . . inform, instruct, or persuade,” but
- writing as “a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding”

Students engage with ideas

- not rote memorization
- not a detached encounter with an idea
- instead,
 - a direct encounter or confrontation with a question or issue
 - an exploration that goes into some depth & detail
 - a conclusion to which the student commits him- or herself

Consistent with the New Paradigm for Teaching

	OLD PARADIGM	NEW PARADIGM
Knowledge	Transferred from faculty to students	Jointly constructed by students and faculty
Student	Passive vessel to be filled by faculty's knowledge	Active constructor, discoverer, transformer of knowledge
Mode of learning	Memorizing	Relating
Faculty purpose	Classify and sort students	Develop students' competencies and talents
Student goals	Complete requirements, achieve certification within a discipline	Grow, focus on continual lifelong learning within a broader system

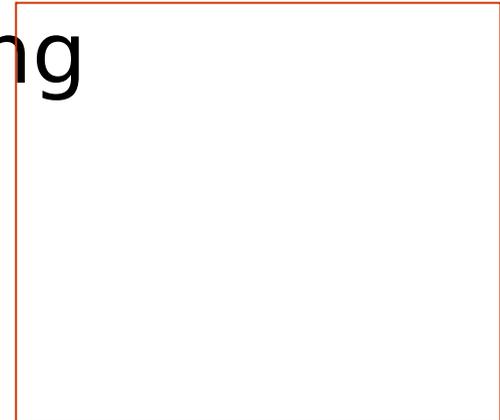


Universally applicable

- can work for any instructor in any discipline
- enormously flexible

Writing helps students with

- critical thinking
- independent learning
- exploration
- explanation
- focused thoughts
- personalized ideas
- retention of concepts



Improves student writing

- “Low stakes writing also increases fluency and confidence in writing and helps with creativity and risk taking.”
- Peter Elbow and Mary Deane Sorcinelli, “How To Enhance Learning by Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing,” http://works.bepress.com/sorcinelli_mary/1/

How to Work with Low- Stakes Writing Assignments

Basic questions

- How often?
- When?
- What form?
- How long?

How to create them

- link LSW to other tasks and specific learning outcomes
- spell out expectations
- provide criteria for grading
- be ready to get assignments back to students quickly

Be purposeful

- assignments should lead directly to the learning outcomes you value
- not just something that's fun

LSW and learning outcomes

	A	B	C
1	ENGL 358 Victorian Literature		
2			LOW STAKES
3	1. Inquire		
4	1.1		
5	why inquiry is essential	1.1.1	X
6	5 questions about texts	1.1.2	X
7	1.2		
8	essential questions	1.2.1	X
9	1.3		
10	5 web sites	1.3.1	
11	5 non-web sources of info	1.3.2	
12	2. Explore		
13	2.1		
14	narratives	2.1.1	X
15	poems	2.1.2	X
16	non-fiction prose	2.1.3	X
17	patterns	2.1.4	X
18	connections w/in & btw texts	2.1.5	X
19	2.2		
20	info literacy: 5 qualities	2.2.1	
21	chars. of literary excellence	2.2.2	
22	2.3		
23	paraphrase / summary	2.3.1	X
24	2.4		
25	insight, creativity	2.4.1	

26	3. Conclude		
27	3.1		
28	marshalling evidence	3.1.1	X
29	link evidence to conclusion	3.1.2	X
30	3.2		
31	use other sources	3.2.1	X
32	3.3		
33	articulate conclusions	3.3.1	X
34			
35	4. Persuade		
36	4.1		
37	evidence supports thesis	4.1.1	
38	reason effectively	4.1.2	
39	develop adequately	4.1.3	
40	write skillfully	4.1.4	
41	4.2		
42	support assertions in class	4.2.1	

Before the first assignment

- describe conventions of LSW
- explain purpose of this assignment
- provide a sample response
- ask for questions

Samples of LSW Assignments

Online Search: the Mother Lode

- search for “low-stakes writing assignments” online

Direct questions

- What is the thesis?
- How is **A** similar to / different from **B**?
- How does **A** relate to **B**?
- What alternatives could the writer have considered?
- What were the four main arguments for / against the proposed policy?

More open direct question

- When Little Father Time asks Sue whether it would be better to be dead than alive, she answers, “It would almost, dear.” The consequences are appalling. What do we know about Sue’s circumstances and character that could help explain her irresponsible response to the boy’s mournful question?

Direct question: pitched to suit the students' needs

- What would have been a more appropriate response? *or*
- Where else in the novel does Sue speak with equal heedlessness of what her listener requires and the likely consequences of her words?
or
- What themes of the book are evident in this response from Sue?

Familiar forms of writing

- explanatory letter to a friend or rival
- editorial
- policy proposal to a person in power
- question for an author
- list
 - menu (nutritionally balanced)
 - anthology table of contents
 - agenda

Adopt a persona

- look at an issue, question, policy, choice, or behavior from a specified perspective that is significantly different from the students'
 - e.g.: respond to a specific judgment made in an auditor's report from the perspective of the client *or* a stockholder

QQTP



- Bring to class each day a one-page QQTP sheet:
 - a question prompted by the reading
 - a quotation from the reading that you found compelling, controversial, puzzling, or otherwise remarkable
 - a brief idea or set of ideas you can use as talking points in class discussion

Metacognition

- write one page in which you reflect upon what you knew and/or thought about [topic] before the assignment; explain how your thinking changed (if it did) and why; what questions have arisen for you as a consequence?

Metacognition, post-test

- reflect on your preparation for and performance on this test:
 - how much of the reading did you do?
 - how much time did you spend studying?
 - and when (night before test?)?
 - do you take notes in class? when you read?

Application

- after reading the assignment, describe a real-world application of the principle described there—either where you would see it in action or how you might apply it.

Double-entry responses

■ Left Column

- copy a passage
- summarize
- cite an idea or claim that excites, provokes, puzzles

■ Right Column

- your response
- questions
- analysis
- rebuttal
- explanation / clarification
- imitation . . .

Believing and Doubting

- begin by responding as if you believe *everything* the writer has said
- then respond as if you question every assumption and unsubstantiated claim
 - be logical, not hostile
- write your own conclusion, based on this analysis

In-class LSW

- **beginning:** start the class off thinking about a particular issue
- **middle:** give students time to think about what they've just been learning
- **end:** wind up a class with a chance to reflect on what's been covered

And . . .

- There are *many* other possibilities. The trick is, first, to **match assignments to learning outcomes**, and, second, to **vary them** so that students aren't always doing the same one thing.

Responding to the Assignments

Responding



- *can* be ungraded—even unread by the instructor
- but benefits are more certain when students are held accountable, when they get feedback, and when the instructor is attentive to what they are writing
- *do* talk about responses with students in class

Responding to the writing

- no response beyond comment in class
- mere acknowledgement
- \checkmark , $\checkmark+$, $\checkmark-$
- grades based on a rubric
- checklist
- written comments

Alternative assessments

- peer assessment
- self-assessment
- read aloud in class and comment
- post online as part of forum
- make part of an on-going conversation

The question is, What do you want to accomplish through assessing the assignment?

And now, where can we go
from here?

Sequencing
Low-Stakes
Assignments

Learning to handle complexity

- complex, multi-stage assignments require skills and understanding students often lack
- students frequently
 - concentrate on the wrong things
 - see the world in geographical terms
 - *human* geographical terms
 - can't integrate all the various elements
 - get feedback too late to use it

FOR MANY OF US, THESE ARE ALL SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME WITH OUR STUDENTS.

Big assignment

- “Their critiques of Western society lead Solzhenitsyn and Khomeini to draw different conclusions about fundamental weaknesses in the West. Each proposes solutions to the weaknesses they’ve identified. Which writer proposes the better political solutions? What is your basis for this conclusion?”

A multi-stage process

- students must
 - read
 - summarize
 - compare
 - evaluate
 - conclude
 - persuade
- a misunderstanding or error at any point along the way can spoil the whole project

Sequencing LSWs enables students to

- deal with *manageable* tasks
- concentrate on one step at a time
 - gather information *before* synthesizing or evaluating; assess audience *before* writing
- proceed methodically, without rushing
 - devote prolonged attention to a task
- get early, useful feedback
- understand the process as a series of discrete steps *and* reconsiderations

Simple cumulative assignments

- day 1: offer two different explanations that adequately account for **X** in today's reading / the outcome of the experiment / the lecture we attended . . .
 - day 2: provide supporting evidence for each explanation
 - day 3: argue for the explanation you prefer
-
- moves from simple identification of two possible explanations to finding valid supporting evidence to making a judgment
 - comprehension application evaluation



Cumulative assignments

- #1: **initial impressions** of or questions about (character, process, event . . .)
- #2: **evolving impressions** and sources of the change(s)
- #3: **comparison** with (other character, process, event . . .)
- #4: **thesis** regarding (character, process, event . . .)
- #5: formal **essay** or other project

Alternative

- #1: initial impressions
- #2: response to what your **classmates** have said
- #3: evolving impressions after hearing **outside lecture**
- #4: thesis regarding issue emerging from all these plus reading the **assigned essays**
- #5: formal essay

Three steps to a high-stakes essay

- **1)** Pose two worthwhile questions that have come out of your reading of the novel thus far.
- **2)** Select the question you wish to work on and identify at least five places in the text that directly relate to it.
- **3)** Write a tentative thesis statement for your *Vanity Fair* paper, using the topic that you've been working on.
- **Essay:** Explore and answer the question you've selected.

For introductory business course

- Prepare the following, one each week, following the format provided:
 - Description of business
 - Competition analysis
 - Marketing plans
 - Operating procedures
 - Personnel requirements
 - Financing plans

leads to a business plan and several weeks of further analysis by the class

Try asking . . .

- for the final class meeting: “Now that you have spent the semester studying art history, you should have some ideas about ways in which the subject can be valuable to you. Write 4-5 pages in which you explore the benefits to contemporary Americans of knowledge of the artistic achievements of the past. Feel free to express Results are entirely predictable. any benefits, as well.”

Sequenced reflection 1

1. For Day 2: What do you think will be the value of studying Art History?
[rubric reinforces benefits of honesty / sincerity]
2. Online exploration: find three sites by searching for “Why study art history?” Respond to reasons you find there.
3. Interview someone over 30 on their attitudes towards art. Favorite work? museum?

Sequenced reflection 2

4. Which motive underlies their choice: personal history? conventional attitudes? subject matter? aesthetic judgment? economic considerations? Explain and comment.
5. Draw connections between anything we've studied this semester and some aspect of your own life.
6. Formal essay: your attitudes towards the study of art and art history.

Countless variations

- prepare the introduction to an anthology or textbook
- prepare program notes for a play or concert
- explore a problem and proposing a solution
- move from question to commitment
- expand from personal experience to research-based analysis

Connecting and reflecting

- interviews
- videos and movies
- lectures
- computer program design
- science labs
- oral presentations
- site visits
- art projects
- music performances
- design activities
- athletic events
- video productions
- library searches
- acting

Principles of sequencing

- manageable tasks
- linked to specific learning outcomes
- appropriately timed
- scaffolded
- varied
- quick, focused feedback
- visible continuity
- substantial final product
- discussion of process with class

- questions?
- comments?
- observations?

The End