Writing at University: Commentary and Consideration

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Abstract
This essay takes an experience-based and innovative look at writing in the university curriculum. The issues relate to ways individual teachers perceive writing and also how they might apply writing in their own classes. The ideas expressed here aim to stimulate thinking and re-thinking about writing. They will be proposed as ‘dichotomies’ and ‘concept pairs’, with the common bond that they relate to the practice and promotion of writing.

大学のカリキュラムにおけるライティング—研究ノート

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要旨
本稿は、大学のカリキュラムにおけるライティングに関する実体験に基づいた新たな取り組みであり、個々の教員によるライティングの捉え方と授業におけるライティングの応用法に関する諸問題を扱うものである。本稿は、ライティングの実践と促進に関する「二項対立」あるいは「概念ペア」として新たな提案を行うものであり、ライティングのあり方に関する考察と再考を促すことを目的としている。

Introduction

The issue of writing, in any foreign language study curriculum, can be a prickly one. Different people involved might have different ideas about what is writing, what kind of writing to do, how much to do, who should teach it, and the list could go on. It is a subject that takes many input-hours, both by the students and instructors; it is one that has enormous range in terms of possible genres; it is one that has a great scope for mistakes, with an inability to ‘repair’ (we can re-read something, re-phrase when we talk, or ask questions when we listen, but we cannot re-write under the nose of a reader). We could also question the necessity of the focus on writing, or certain kinds of writing, if we consider the relatively small potential for students to actually write, for example, in English, after they graduate. They will probably read in English, listen and perhaps speak in some narrow range, but will they have to write in English? I would hazard to suggest that many students would not say they want to become a fluent writer of English, as opposed to a fluent speaker, listener or reader. In short, writing in a foreign language is hard work! Of course, I am not suggesting that we remove or devalue writing in the curriculum, though its absence as a discrete subject in the Department of English Language and Literature curriculum at Seisen University is surprising. What I will suggest is that we can consider writing in a new and wider
light and thus expand our options.

The aim of this commentary is to share some thoughts on where writing is or could be in the curriculum and classroom. It will do so by raising and discussing ten dichotomies and what we could call ‘concept pairs’. These are often inter-related and some perhaps different shades of the same idea. They are often two sides of the same coin and are, therefore, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Where applicable I will suggest writing approaches or even activities for consideration and I hope to encourage thinking about writing in the curriculum. Furthermore, although I will limit my references to writing in the English language, I feel this essay is relevant to writing in any language study and perhaps university-wide.

1. Writing curriculum – Writing in the curriculum

- ‘Writing curriculum’ refers to planned and scheduled approaches to writing in the form of specific skill classes, usually under curricular guidance
- ‘Writing in the curriculum’ refers to the occurrence of writing in subjects across the curriculum.

This comparison is not a particularly new insight, but I feel it does frame the dichotomies and paired concepts to come. It is particularly of interest to the Department of English Language and Literature. The writing curriculum refers to specifically designated writing skill classes and their syllabi. While certain instructors do offer such classes as electives, there is currently no such compulsory class in the department curriculum. This does not mean that it does not happen. Writing in the curriculum does occur through assignments required by instructors. This particular dichotomy is a debate that can be quite heated. Do we ‘unnaturally’ isolate the skill, break it down in pieces, show it to the students, ask them to demonstrate that they can rebuild it, and then hope they can apply it in a real situation at a later date? Or, do we demonstrate it as a specific genre through models when necessary, place it in a clear content context, and then ask students to produce? There are arguments and reasons for both, perhaps.

2. Writing requirement – Requirement of writing

- ‘Writing requirement’ refers to classes specifically about writing.
- ‘Requirement of writing’ refers to classes that include some writing as part of course requirements.

Language skills classes usually include ‘writing classes’ and the range of these ‘writing requirement’ classes is wide. These can be compulsory or
elective. Many are based on set textbooks or materials that may claim to practice and develop skills for specific genres, for example, academic writing. The progress of the writing requirement class is generally prescribed by the text or instructor and involves the incremental instruction and practice of target language or forms through drills and exercises. Students will be expected to perfect the target language or forms. The culmination may be the production of a longer and often graded activity (project or essay) before moving on to the next target. These classes are about writing, however writing can be addressed by other means.

The ‘requirement of writing’ can be a part of any class or course. Of course, reports, reaction papers, essays and researched papers have always been part and parcel of tertiary classes. These often appear not only at the end of semesters or the academic year, but also at the same time as similar requirements in other classes. There can be shorter, ‘continuous’ writing assignments set over the semester. They may ‘stand alone’ or they may accumulate to form a ‘whole’ at the end of semester that only requires minimal revision. For instance, in one class I require a short, 10-minute, written ‘What did you think of this topic?’ activity at the end of some lectures. It requires the students to record their impressions while they are fresh. They may use English or Japanese and these writings remain with the students. At the end of the semester I require students to review these written impressions in a more formal, directed fashion to be written in English. This is but one example. Instructors could examine their own classes, consider the content and approaches to find new ways to require writing.

3. Writing by the book – Writing in the book

- ‘Writing by the book’ refers using textbooks to teach writing.
- ‘Writing in the book’ refers to the act of writing to communicate.

There is no shortage of writing-related textbooks. Often these are in a graded level series from beginner to advanced. Often they have a specific market in mind. They may be integrate with other skill areas and activities, or culminate into a task-based activity that replicates some focus genre. There is nothing wrong with this approach because it gives students a framework and models on which to base their own writing. My own Communications II class and quite a deal of my research concerns introducing and refining the conventions and requirements of academic writing, using reaction papers as a vehicle. Students do need models of writing. The idea of raising this dichotomy is that, more and more, textbooks, or ‘writing by the book’, will be based on what the book wants students to do with writing rather than what students want to do with writing. The means becomes the end.

By ‘writing in the book’, I mean allowing students the opportunity to
write — purely and simply to put pen to paper. This does not mean writing without form or direction, but the emphasis is not on practicing form but producing thoughts, writing in volume and following what interests them or has meaning to them at the time. One way to do this would be to associate un-fettered writing with courses students undertake. However, a better way may be to emphasize the act of writing before specific content. Diaries are one way to do this. They can, of course, be related to classes in the form of ‘learning diaries’. Here, content is a component, however, the diary entries are more concerned with how the student is learning in and reacting to class and content. In another sense the diary can be the aim and the end. In the past I have taught writing courses that include a student diary requirement. While not everyone’s cup of tea, diaries have proven to me and many, many instructors and students involved, that students who take this activity on-board massively increase their output, quality and enjoyment of writing in English. Guidelines and directions can be established (need to be in most cases) but these can also come from students or at least with student input. Furthermore, diaries can be in two forms, private/unshared, or public/shared. In the former case, the author self-monitors and takes on the responsibility to actually do it. It also allows them to control their volume and content at their discretion. How to ‘assess’ this is problematic. Public/shared diaries are shared with designated people. The person may be an instructor or a ‘diary partner’. There are various possibilities in the latter respect and the assessment is easier.

4. ‘Big W’ writing – ‘small w’ writing

- ‘Big W’ writing refers to writing assignments that are expected or generic to university settings.
- ‘Small w’ writing refers to writing that may be procedural, unexpected or innovative for a university setting.

When ‘writing’ and ‘university’ are mentioned in the same breath, it raises expectations about certain kinds of activities and requirements, or in other words, activities that are ‘Big’ in people minds. Borrowing this concept from studies on ‘culture’, Big ‘W’ writing refers to very visible and acknowledged forms of writing such as reports, reaction papers, academic papers of varying length, and of course, theses. The use of external sources would figure heavily and the expectation would be that Big ‘W’ writing conforms to certain accepted styles and conventions of presentation, MLA or APA, for example. These, of course, have a place.

We could, however, consider other more ‘incidental’ pieces of writing, or writing that is not as obvious but occurs as part of the process leading to Big ‘W’ writing. For instance, if the eventual aim is a research paper, smaller steps and stages of writing can also be set and required, such as simple topic
discussions, brainstorming, key vocabulary lists, summaries, notes taken during discussions with the instructor, outlines and so on. These ‘small w’ writing examples could also include any writing related to oral presentations, such as handouts, note-cards, PowerPoint (which can be printed out). By locking ourselves into the idea that writing must be prose, we are denying ourselves access to important writing and not acknowledging legitimate work done by students as ‘small w’. In both my Presentation Workshop (Yr 1) and Public Speaking (Yr 2) classes all writing done is considered, from the beginning rough planning notes on.

5. Writing formally – Writing informally

- ‘Writing formally’ refers to writing that could be regarded as ‘ceremonial’ or ‘official’.
- ‘Writing informally’ refers to writing that could be regarded as more ‘casual’ or ‘freestyle’.

At first glance this dichotomy is one of obvious consideration when it comes to writing. By ‘formal’ we could say that it is writing that is required to fit some agreed on ‘form’ or ‘structure’ or ‘shape’ or ‘rules’. Of course, we could say this is true of a graduate school thesis of 100,000 words or a 150-character (not word) limit blog entry. At university, examples of ‘formal’ writing are reports, research papers, reaction papers and the like. These have certain requirements of structure, length, lexicon and also levels of research evidence and the author’s own opinions. They should take time and care to evolve, and they are (or should be) planned and written carefully. They probably would have physical presentation requirements – being typed, on white paper etc. Formal writing could also be said to be writing for ‘public’ display or consumption. So we could perhaps easily imagine formal writing in the university setting.

What, then, is ‘informal’ writing? Clearly the prefix ‘in’ meaning ‘opposite’ is a hint. ‘Informal’ is the opposite of ‘formal’. This also occurs at university – handwritten notes taken from a source, rough plans in the lead-up to ‘formal’ writing, brainstorming diagrams and so on. The idea is that informal writing is for ‘private’ use by the creator – I don’t say ‘author’ because it has formal implications. Informal writing is perhaps more opportunistic, it definitely does not confirm to rules of formal writing even though we could say note-taking, for instance, is a genre. For these reasons informal writing may not be valued as much as formal writing, but I would strongly suggest that it is no less valuable as ‘writing’. So, we could say that the ‘formal-informal’ dichotomy is based on a number of things: adherence to agreed-on rules, physical presentation and a further dichotomy of public-private use. We could consider both as writing.
6. Formal writing – Informal writing

- ‘Formal writing’ refers to writing that primarily fulfils ‘form’ or ‘formulaic’ requirements.
- ‘Informal writing’ refers to writing that primarily ‘informs’.

   I would like to suggest that there is another interpretation of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ to consider. It is quite easy to write something of little substance or meaning, i.e. not informative or original, but to do so in a way that meets a required ‘form’. It looks appropriate, but really does not say much. In some cases, students are very skilled at following procedures and form, to the detriment of content. A further detriment is length, as student strive to meet a magic number regardless of quality in some cases. Again, form and sustain (i.e. length) are important, but we must also consider the quality of information also.

   ‘Informal’ writing, or writing that is required to be highly informative, can also be considered. Ideally it also has elements of ‘formal’ writing and is of volume, but it can also be short, succinct, and compact. These can be in the form of purposely short writing assignments that require students to be brief, but precise. My own Communication Skills II class requires ‘only’ one A-4 page of writing per assignment but demands that it be very well crafted. ‘Informal’ writing in this sense can also not require prose; meaning that organised, note-form and concentrated information such as formal outlines, notecards, PowerPoint can suffice. Indeed, because they are visibly short it drives home to students the need to provide more information, and at ever deeper levels. It encourages students to think more deeply to create meaningful content. This can then be used for formal and extended writing.

7. Writing – Writing Plus (+)

- ‘Writing’ refers to writing text only.
- ‘Writing +’ refers to text with the addition of other ways and means of communication.

   Writing does not have to be only writing. There is still a hardcore tradition that the written word is the start and end of information at university, or that visually-represented information has no place in students’ assignments. We are in the ‘information century’, however, and our students are very much conditioned to handling non-textual information. Students are far more visual than we are. While the written word is obviously the most important medium of communication at university, we can no longer ignore visuals. Also, these can often be much more stimulating and thus motivating for students.
‘Writing +’ includes assignments that allow, require, students to use information other than text in addition to writing. There are no boundaries here. It could be in the form of supporting pictures, graphs, sound (such as music) or even realia. This not only fits with the students’ concepts of information, it also allows them a chance to be more creative and inventive. It ‘livens’ up assignments and can give weaker students a sense of success. It caters to different learning styles and strengths and in no way at all detracts from the written forms or requirements. The saying goes ‘a picture tells a thousand words’, but, of course, a thesis paper it does not make. However, a thousand-word essay supported by relevant visual can be more than the sum of two parts if done correctly.

‘Writing +’ can also mean writing with additional skills requirements that, although not text, enhance the text. Computer skills are essential, but a surprising number of Japanese university students are not adept at using them for writing purposes. Studies have shown them to be quite computer-iliterate. ‘Writing +’ can require computer use, also it can establish conventions and layout protocols that can only ‘professional-ize’ written work.

8. Independent writing – Interdependent writing

- ‘Independent writing’ refers to writing activities that are ‘one off’ or ‘stand alone’.
- ‘Inter-dependent writing’ refers to writing activities that fit together.

At university much effort is sometimes put into large, single activities, such as reports or papers. They can and should have steps in the process, planning and rewriting for instance, but often it is only the final product that receives attention and it is generally ‘independent’ from other forms of writing. In some ways the emphasis on final product is not a good reward for the effort that goes in. (I might add that issues of authorship can also arise.) ‘Interdependent writing’ in the sense that I am using it here means that a number of writing activities can revolve and relate around a similar topic. Students, we hope, put a lot of effort into their assignments. If we tell students that they will write a 1000-word essay on a topic, I can imagine that they will not greet this task with much enthusiasm. We can, however, approach the same end aim (essay) differently. Ideally an essay would follow a process:

Approach 1
1. topic chosen and roughly outlined
2. topic researched
3. essay planned more formally
4. essay Draft One written
5. Draft One reviewed
6. Draft Two written and submitted (Graded)
We might expect teachers to leave students to their own devices and take care of Steps 1 to 5 by themselves and deliver to us the final Draft Two. An inter-dependent writing approach might be:

Approach 2
1. topic chosen and roughly outlined
2. topic researched
3. topic planned as a PowerPoint (or poster) following guidelines (Graded)
4. topic reviewed and formal outline created based on PPT or part of (Graded)
5. Draft One written and submitted (Graded)

In both approaches, each step requires a different kind of writing, but they are not particularly different in what teachers are asking students to do. For example, Approach 1 asked for the essay to be more formally planned (Step 3) and the inter-dependent Approach 2 asked for a PowerPoint presentation (Step 3). Both activities should consider sections and note-form details. The Inter-dependent writing approach has each key stage as a distinct activity that is both required to be done at a certain time (a deadline) and to be complete. Approach 1 cannot guarantee this. Inter-dependent writing also highlights the process as each activity builds on the previous while allowing changes or additions. Furthermore, it demands a valid ‘paper trail’ from idea to essay.

9. ‘Writing overload’ – ‘Writing underload’

- ‘Writing overload’ refers to the timing/kind of writing activities that result in students having multiple assignments due at the same time.
- ‘Writing underload’ refers to timing/kind of writing activities that result in students having no assignments for substantial periods of the semester.

It is virtually impossible nor desirable to fully coordinate student writing loads at university. Students do try to do it informally by careful selection of classes and/or advice from seniors perhaps. Generally it seems large requirements of writing come at the end of semesters and may be of similar genre (reports, essays mostly). It is not uncommon for a student to have several due at around the same time. This overload cannot be good for the quality of the work. There is also potential for under-load during the semester as students and classes deal with content. I have no exact solution to this situation, but using the ideas described above may be a way to alleviate the overload and underload.

10. Writing – Righting

- ‘Writing’ refers to all practices that require students to write.
- ‘Righting’ refers to considering a better or ‘right’ balance of all practices that require students to write.
Through these research notes and ideas I have attempted to propose both complementary and opposing views about writing. There is no question, however, that writing is essential to university study, in two senses of that word. Writing is the essence of thinking and learning, which is what university is about, and it is a vehicle to demonstrate what students have distilled from their studies and classes. But, in this piece I have also suggested there could be a better balance and direction, that our conception of what is writing and how it can be required needs ‘righting’ in order to make it a good habit for our students, more enjoyable, more relevant and, simply, more.

This essay has raised some issues with the promotion and the practice writing in English across the curriculum in mind. Drawing on experience of over twenty-five years of teaching writing, it presents ideas in the form of dichotomies that juxtapose accepted and more traditional ideas about writing with what I feel are approaches that are more in tune with reality and the needs for innovation. Readers will have perhaps noted that there is no mention of grammar, of process writing, of error correction, and a myriad range of other writing-related issues. Writing is no easy or simple topic and ten dichotomies is certainly not the end.

**Note**
The author is more than willing to show interested readers examples of his approaches and his students’ attempts at writing.