
Using PBL to Improve Student Communication Skills

Steve Bernhardt
sab@udel.edu

Tipsheets: <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/staff/>

Imagine a particular class...
--one that you recently
taught with PBL or
--one you are planning to
teach

Why write in the PBL classroom?

- Reflect—think about the problem, writing helps process, aids thinking
- To communicate—with each other, with you, with audience
- Record of assessment
- Summarize, conclude, recommend,
- Record of activity, logs, process, record
- Force abstract to concrete
- Sense of progress
- Allows critique—makes it public
- Empowering—controlling writing is controlling activity

A Lesson From WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum)

We want students to become good writers, but we also want students to be good learners.

Faculty don't necessarily need to be writing teachers—they can use writing to promote learning.

Communicating and Thinking

- We don't know what we think until we see what we say.
- We don't own information until we put it in our own words.
- If you can't write it or speak it clearly, you probably don't understand it.
- Writing is thinking, discovery, problem-solving.

Professionals-in-Training

Students consistently had difficulty, across all disciplines:

- gathering sufficient specific information
- constructing the audience and the self
- stating a position
- using appropriate discipline-based methods
- managing complexity & organizing information

Walvoord & McCarthy:
Thinking and Writing in College

What Do Students Say?

- Writing is the one skill students most want to improve—mentioned >3X as often as any other skill.
- Students are most engaged with courses that assign writing.
- Writing increases the time students spend on the course, the extent to which they feel intellectually challenged, and their level of interest.
- Writing instruction is best during junior and senior years—organized around a substantive discipline.

Light, Richard J. *Making the Most of College*

Think of a situation where you produced really good writing or spoke really well.

What helped you be a good communicator?

The Problem Is the Situation

Communicators need a sense of situation:

- An exigency—a real problem
- A strong sense of purpose
- A sense of audience
- An understanding of constraints

PBL defines the problem space.

What kinds of writing?

- Lab reports
- Lesson plans
- Mind maps
- Self assessment
- Brochures
- Care plans
- Reflective journals
- Letters-dictations
- Emails
- PowerPoint
- Postings/chat/discussion
- Feedback
- Applications
- Learning logs

PBL spaces for team communication

- **Shared vision:**
What's the problem? What's our goal or target?
- **Team planning and governing processes:**
How are we going to solve this problem?
- **Stated uncertainty:**
What do we know? What don't we know?
- **Presentation of consensus:**
What have we learned? What do we recommend?
- **Space for reflection:**
How did we do? Where did we go wrong?

What Kinds of Speaking?

- Team discussion
- Problem definition
- Structured problem solving
- Trial solution
- Expert interview
- Rehearsal
- Test results
- Progress report
- Recommendation
- Briefing
- Impact assessment
- Peer evaluation
- Reflective

Integrating Communication

- <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/staff/integrating.doc>

Alternative assignments

- <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/staff/altassg.doc>

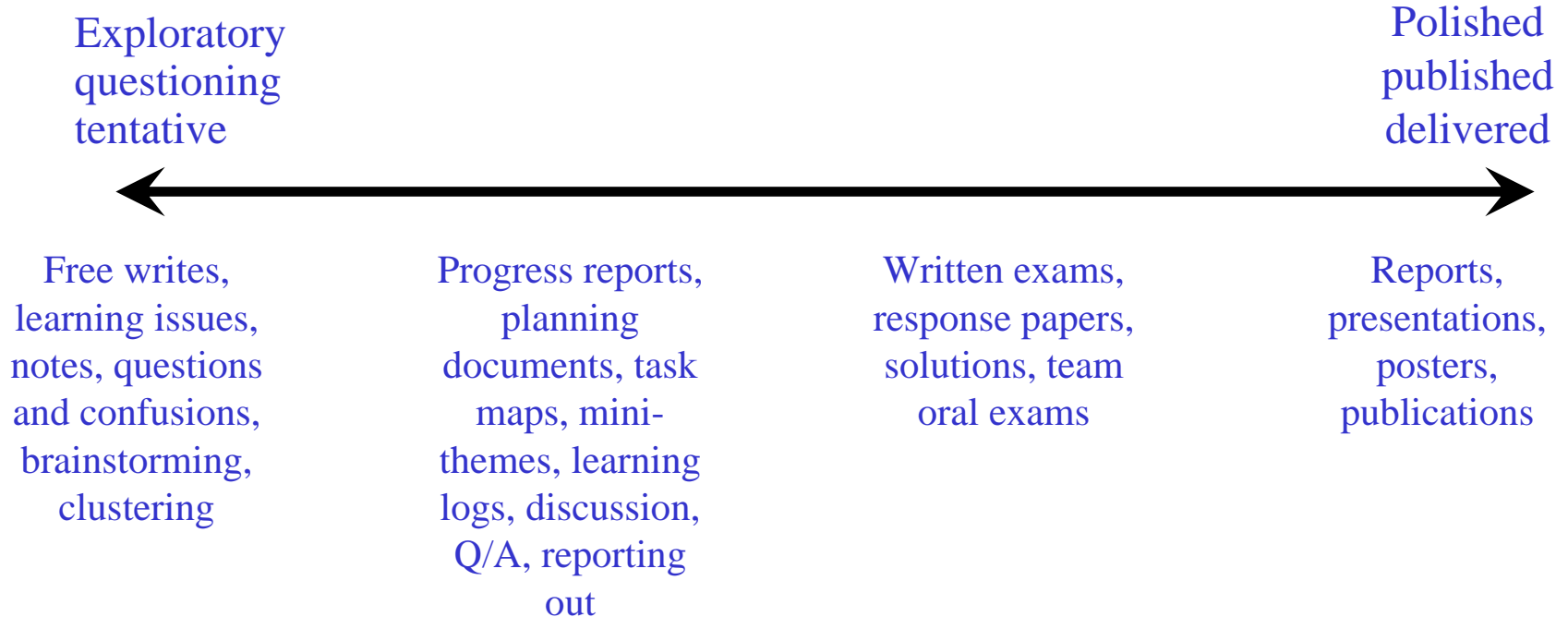
Sequenced Assignments

- <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/staff/sequencing.doc>

What makes a good assignment?

- Relates to course goals and learning objectives.
- Defines clear situation, purpose, audience.
- Defines task demands: time, resources, deliverable
- Defines process
- Sets instructional goal—informal, formal
- Sets standards for evaluation: rubrics, criteria, models

By-product or End-product?



How Do We Integrate Communication?

- Engaging scenarios
- Staged assignments
- Prewriting
- Brainstorming
- Clustering
- Reflective writing
- Think/write/talk
- Structured problem solving
- Modeling
- Peer reviewing
- Using technology
- Providing rubrics
- Short, frequent writing