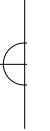
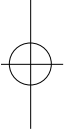
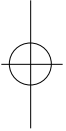
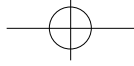
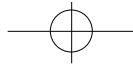


Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum

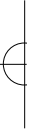
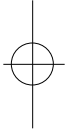




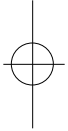
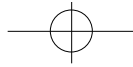


Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum

Charles R. Duke
and
Rebecca Sanchez



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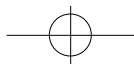


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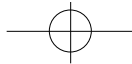
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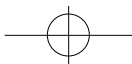
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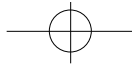
Foreword

As classroom teachers, we are hearing more and more from the public about the need for accountability, the importance of standards, and the role of assessment. We also hear calls from employers for authentic performance tasks, learning opportunities which reflect, as much as possible, what students will encounter when they enter the workplace. We have Presidents' agendas in education, and national education goals set by state governors. We also have new content standards in math, science, English language arts, history, art, and other fields, all of which are based on the assumption that students will be able to use writing as one of the major means for showing their knowledge and skills in all of these areas. State-wide and district-wide testing programs also are requiring more extensive samples of writing performance from students as part of an evaluation of the effectiveness of curriculum and teaching.

This added emphasis upon writing across the curriculum (WAC), however, has spawned an increasing anxiety among teachers in content fields. Many of these teachers never had any formal training in the teaching of writing, have little idea of how writing might be used for learning in addition to evaluating and, in many cases, are using strategies which become barriers to students who may wish to demonstrate that they can perform at satisfactory levels in many of these fields.

Couple this concern about how to use writing effectively to support learning as well as demonstrate it with almost an equal unease about assessment in general, and we have the ingredients for considerable confusion among both teachers and students on what is possible, and what may be important. Admittedly, it may be much easier to rely upon standardized examinations, and nationally normed assessments like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) but, unfortunately, little useful teaching information can be gleaned from such assessments. From the classroom teacher's viewpoint, then, we need to refocus our attention upon what might be accomplished with assessment inside the classroom.

We would like to suggest that one powerful way to engage students in learning and to assess that learning is through writing. In making this suggestion, however, we also want to make clear that writing represents only one of a number of ways that student learning can be assessed, and teachers need to equip themselves with a broad understanding of assessment in order to determine which may be the most appropriate assessment strategy or approach to use at any given time. Our choices depend upon our goals—what is it we wish to assess? Richard Stiggins (1995) explains that “assessment-literate educators—be they teachers, principals, curriculum directors, or superintendents—come to any assessment knowing what they are assessing, why they are doing so, how best to achieve the assessment of interest, how to generate sound samples of performance, what can go wrong, and how to prevent those problems before they occur” (p. 240).



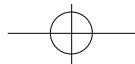
As we look across the school curriculum, we see at least one common theme related to assessment. All teachers expect that students will master considerable subject-matter knowledge; in fact, teachers probably will agree that mastery of knowledge provides the basis upon which all other performance can be built. But the question of how students learn not only that knowledge but the application of it remains. We believe that writing is one effective way for students to master content and demonstrate their application of it. Leon Botstein (1989), for instance, says that “the bridge between technical and specialized worlds of modern mathematics and science and daily life and experience must be constructed out of ordinary language” (p. xv). Besides speech, writing is our only other primary means for providing that translation. Botstein also points out that “ordinary language can also reach beyond the utilitarian, by opening up the beauty of science and mathematics” (p. xv). The real answer to effective learning and performance does not lie with more lists, more facts, more drill, but with teaching approaches which engage students in discovering what they know and what they can do.

We have chosen to focus this book on the assessment of writing to learn. We use the term “assessment” in the broadest sense possible to encompass both formative and summative views of student learning. We see assessment as a process for gaining useful information about student learning that can assist us in making appropriate decisions about our teaching. Equally important, however, is how we communicate with our students about the results of the assessment. So, readers will not find a discussion of norms, standard deviations or statistical validity. Instead, we hope to present writing assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process in content areas. We also subscribe to the viewpoint that not all writing has to be graded—in fact, the philosophy of this text is not to emphasize the collection of grades in writing but instead to emphasize the role of assessment in communicating with students about their progress and growth. As Neill and others in *Implementing Performance Assessments: A Guide to Classroom, School and System Reform* (n.d.) assert, “Assessment is therefore about the ‘how’ of learning as well as the ‘what’ and ‘how much’” (p. 3). Consequently, we cannot separate assessment from teaching; they are, or should be, inextricably interwoven.

What readers will find in *Assessment of Writing Across the Curriculum* is a forum for discussion of practical, classroom-tested instructional strategies that encompass effective writing assessment of learning. Central to this discussion is the exploration of a variety of what might be called alternative assessments, alternative, at least, to the traditional multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, end-of-unit, end-of-course tests. We also have chosen to focus upon the classroom teacher’s role in this process because we believe that the most important relationship in learning is that which evolves between teacher and student and, that when it comes to using writing as a means for learning and assessment, most teachers—and that includes many English language arts teachers—have not received much assistance.

Adopting this stance calls for accepting some basic assumptions:

1. Students must be asked to show their understanding of what they are learning through writing.
2. Students should be asked to perform in a variety of modes of writing to match the variety of writing tasks they will encounter outside of school.
3. Writing should be used as a means of building a bridge between new knowledge and prior knowledge and experience.



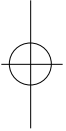
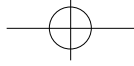
4. Teachers who use writing as part of their overall assessment package in the classroom will need to accept new instructional and assessment roles.
5. Growth in writing performance is developmental and takes time as well as practice.

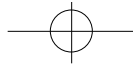
We hope that readers will not overlook any of the chapters in this book. Although there may be a temptation to look only at chapters that address a particular content area, readers will find in each chapter ideas, strategies and assessment tools which can be adapted easily for any content area. The book has been divided into three sections. In section one, the focus is upon rethinking the methods by which we use writing in our classrooms; here readers will find a clear focus upon what it means to emphasize writing to learn as opposed to writing to test. The authors in this section draw upon their own experience in finding ways to integrate writing into their teaching. In section two, readers will find an emphasis upon crafting assignments in various content areas and upon ways of assessing the products which emerge from these assignments; again, the emphasis is upon practical, how-to-do-it approaches. Finally, in section three, the focus is upon staff development and the ways that schools can make a commitment to helping teachers learn how to use writing effectively. Total school commitment to writing to learn can have a tremendous impact upon student achievement.

We do not suggest that the presence of writing is a new one in the classrooms across the curriculum, but we do know that for writing to be an effective part of the teaching and learning process, teachers need to know quite precisely what their goals are and how to gather evidence from student performance in writing that those goals are being met. We hope that the chapters in this book will prove useful in undertaking this effort.

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—Charles R. Duke and Rebecca Sanchez

