

Pedagogue Bonus: Writing Across the Curriculum (w/Chris Anson)

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, I talk with Chris Anson about Writing Across the Curriculum.

Chris M. Anson is Distinguished University Professor, Professor of English, and Director of the Campus Writing and Speaking Program at North Carolina State University, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in language, composition, and literacy and works with faculty across the curriculum to improve undergraduate education in the areas of writing and speaking. Before moving to NCSU in 1999, he spent fifteen years at the University of Minnesota, where he directed the Program in Composition from 1988-96. Chris has published 16 books and over 130 journal articles and book chapters and is on the editorial or reader's boards of numerous journals, including *College English*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Across the Disciplines*, *Written Communication*, *Assessing Writing*, and *The Journal of Writing Assessment*.

Chris, one of your main areas of expertise is writing across the curriculum. You've devoted a lot of time and energy to writing across the curriculum and faculty development. You've led hundreds of presentations and workshops throughout your career. I was hoping you could talk briefly about your interest in writing across the curriculum and how you work with faculty across disciplines, so coordinators and those interested in writing across the curriculum can get a better sense of your approach and what excites you about that work.

CA: So, I really love writing-to-learn. I love that sort of sub-branch of the writing across the curriculum movement. And whenever I'm doing something with faculty who are sort of new to the idea of increasing attention to writing to feeling as if they're supporting the development of students' writing when there might be a biologist or a soil scientist or an engineer, I usually begin with writing-to-learn because their interests lie there. They want their students to learn complex, difficult material in their courses. And if we can convince them that some kinds of writing will help the students to learn that material more effectively then we've placed a little hook in them, and we can start tugging a little bit. And the writing-to-learn emphasis typically focuses on lower stakes, short, informal assignments that can be really interesting. They don't have to teach the genres of the discipline.

They can be anything. That can be a dialogue or they can be some kind of vignette or something because it's focusing on learning the material. I call it "input based writing" because not the consequence of learning, which is typically the way teachers think about writing. It's a kind of test. It's the end product of learning and this is just the reverse. It's really writing as a way into understanding and so it's going to be tentative, it's going to be exploratory, it's going to be partly articulated, it might have errors, it's done a fairly quickly. The challenge is helping teachers to get away from the mindset that they have to force their students to write in perfect, correct English all the time. They have to get used to tolerating ambiguity, errors, the lack of a thesis,

question asking, wondering aloud. The kinds of features that you see in that informal writing that are really almost the flip side of formal academic writing.

They're the things you don't want to see in formal academic writing, but you welcome them in this kind of "input based writing" along the way to learning. So we do a lot of work with that, a lot of work with designing those kinds of assignments and then slowly transition toward the more formal; because we've hooked them a little bit and we can then help them to develop the higher stakes, more formal assignments, but also through iterations of drafting and revision. The kind of process work that goes way back in our field, but it's still for many teachers across the curriculum, pretty new.

They are typically of the mindset that you assign collect and grade. And that's not doing students much service in terms of helping them to develop complex arguments or work with complex data in larger pieces of writing through iterations of drafts and revisions. So really introducing them to something that we've been doing for a long time in writing courses within the field. It's a little bit different than working with, for example, new newly appointed TAs who are going to be teaching first year writing. These are communities of scholar teachers. Some of whom may have been teaching for many, many years. They're senior faculty. And there's something really exciting and dynamic about working with those groups because they bring a huge amount of experience to the work of, let's say, a workshop, but they lack a certain orientation or certain experience around writing. So there's a high level of learning and a high level of discussion by virtue of the cohort of who the people are. At the same time, you see a lot of things opening up for them that they may not get opened up outside the actual disciplinary work of their field.

For many teachers that I've worked with, they feel that they've learned how to teach over many years. And then when you provide some new perspectives, you watch that learning, you watch them reopen their minds to different possibilities, at a late stage sometimes in their career. And that can be really exciting. You're actually creating change because they're going to be working with dozens and hundreds of students in the future. So one of the thrills that I get out of doing that is I feel like I'm affecting student learning indirectly, obviously one person removed, which is the teacher, but affecting a lot more students than I might individually in my own classes.

So I have a room with let's say 30 faculty. They're going to go off and do things a little bit better and differently as a result, we hope. And that can affect literally thousands of students. And if you multiply that by many occasions, you've got tens of thousands of students. And that's humbling to think that that might be something that you're contributing to over time.