

Low Stakes Writing as an Instructional Strategy to Engage Students

Carmel Parker White, Ph.D.
East Carolina University

Susan Reichelt, Ph.D.
Winthrop University

Barbara Woods, Ph.D.
East Carolina University

ABSTRACT. Low stakes writing has the goal of increasing how much students think about, understand, and learn the content being taught and is typically ungraded or graded informally. Students in two child development and family relations courses were asked to participate in low stakes writing. Students reported that low stakes writing helped facilitate the transition into the class session, allowed them to apply course content, and helped them to better understand themselves and others. The majority of students reported that low stakes writing questions were valuable and effective. Students provided comments about why low stakes writing was an effective learning tool and identified other benefits for course instructors. Low stakes writing is an easily implemented and effective strategy to engage students in the classroom.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how low stakes writing assignments can be used to promote writing across the curriculum (WAC). Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) have differentiated between high stakes and low stakes writing. High stakes writing includes assignments such as essays, term papers, and other academic writing. The writing is expected to be of a high quality and bears directly on the course grade. In contrast, low stakes writing has a goal of increasing how much students think about, understand, and learn the content being taught. This type of writing is ungraded or graded informally. Examples of low stakes writing include exploratory or focus questions at the beginning of a class or unit, free writing in response to a question in the middle of a lesson, summary writing as a measure of assessment at the end of a class period, or reflective journal writing. We will explain how we used low stakes writing in two higher education courses in child development and family relations (CDFR) and describe the advantages our students identified from engaging in these assignments.

Direct correspondence to Dr. Carmel Parker White at whitec@ecu.edu

Most university faculty have not had explicit training in effective teaching practices when they begin their careers in higher education. Therefore, literacy education may be unfamiliar to many instructors. While primary and secondary school teachers in the United States are required to take a literacy course in order to obtain their teaching license, university faculty are generally uninformed about how to employ literacy methods to advance student learning. Literacy education includes the integration of WAC. WAC is based on the belief that language is "integral to *learning* as well as to *communication* in all disciplines" (Farrell-Childers, Gere, & Young, 1994, p. 2). Brewster and Klump (2004) have indicated that:

WAC seeks three things: to increase the frequency of student writing, to integrate and elaborate writing strategies throughout the different content areas, and to promote the instrumental use of writing as a tool for other academic ends. . . . Seen in this way, WAC is more than just writing instruction, more than just making students write more, more than trying to get students to write better. It is the strategic integration of carefully designed writing tasks in any content area to serve the ends of learning, authentic communication, personal engagement, and reflective authorship (p. 7).

Low stakes WAC assignments can include journals or other ungraded assignments that help students "think on paper." Having students write for themselves as audience, explaining things to themselves before explaining to someone else, is a powerful way to help students learn (Fulwiler & Young, 1982).

Pedagogically, low stakes writing should have several advantages. Students need to be actively engaged while writing and reflecting on their experiences, beliefs, and knowledge of course content. Writing should also encourage integration of prior knowledge and familiar events. If used at the beginning of the class period, low stakes writing can help the student transition from engagement in a previous activity to focusing attention on the course content at hand. Comments written by students can prepare them to share during class discussion. If not shared in class discussions, it also provides the opportunity for students to communicate their experiences through writing. In this paper, we will explain how low stakes writing was integrated into two CDFR courses at an eastern United States university that does not have a clearly-defined WAC program in place.

The first course in which low stakes writing was implemented was a parenting and family development course. The objectives for this course included: (a) helping students explore the themes of growth, change, and choice, (b) clarifying attitudes and predispositions toward parenting, (c) preparing students to assume the role of parent, should that be their choice, (d) providing skills for effective parenting of their own or others' children, and (e) reflecting on their own experiences in a family and deciding how they want to parent.

The second course was a consumer education course where the course objectives included: (a) recognizing financial resources available to families and the various ways these resources may be used to achieve financial goals, (b) executing practical decision-making skills to make wise consumer purchases of both goods and services, (c) analyzing alternatives concerning major consumer decisions to maximize personal and family well-being, (d) recognizing the potential for using financial management knowledge in personal, professional, family and social-civic

roles, and (e) implementing consumer practices to enable participation in the American economy as an informed consumer and consumer advocate.

In the parenting and family development course, low stakes writing assignments were implemented five times across the semester. Questions were projected on a screen while students were given approximately 10 to 15 minutes to write. In most instances, the writing assignments were given at the beginning of the 75-minute class period and were referred to as “in class writes.” Submitting in class writes documented class attendance for that day and were included as participation points. Questions were developed to correspond with the respective class topic, as listed in the first column of Table 1.

The consumer education course low stakes writing was integrated in a course that was taught during the summer session. The course met every day for an hour and a half. Low stakes writing was used daily in the form of an introductory or focus question, as can be found in the second column of Table 1. By using the questions at the very beginning of class, the instructor hoped the questions would serve as motivation for course attendance and being on time, in addition to improving students’ understanding of course content. On Fridays, the course content was offered in an online format. An additional low stakes writing assignment entitled Online Discussion Question was required as part of completing the online assignment. In addition to posting their own answer to the questions, students had access and the ability to respond to other classmates’ answers.

Table 1
Example Questions Used in the Two Child Development and Family Relations Courses

Questions Used in the Parenting and Family Development Course for In class Writes	Example Questions Used in the Consumer Education Course for Focus Questions and Online Discussion Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you <u>know</u> about parenting? What do you <u>want to know</u> about parenting? 2. Do you like children and enjoy being in their company? How does your answer affect your decision to become a parent? Do you think that a couple’s marriage should be firmly established before considering parenthood? Why? Why not? What are the most important questions a couple should ask themselves when considering having a child? What are some of the things you would have to “give up” to become a parent? 3. Think back to a time when you were a child or teenager and felt very close to 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are some tools commonly used to help individuals make rational consumer decisions? Do you use these tools? Why or why not? 2. Does advertising impact you? How? 3. In your opinion, what is the most important concept you learned in class to date? How will this help you be a wise consumer? 4. Think of a recent buying decision you made. How did your values or attitudes influence your choice? In the discussion forum, briefly share what you bought and how your choice was influenced by a value or attitude you possess.

<p>one of your parents. Describe your parent's behavior with you. What qualities of your parent created the closeness? Was this type of behavior more of a normal, everyday occurrence for this parent or was this a unique experience?</p> <p>Use the same format as above but insert very distant; created the distance instead of closeness.</p> <p>4. Do you consider yourself an adult? If you do, describe why you consider yourself an adult. If you don't, what behaviors or activities would it take for you to consider yourself an adult?</p> <p>As you've become an adult, how has your relationship with your parent changed? If you do not yet consider yourself an adult, how do you anticipate your relationship changing?</p>	
--	--

In both classes, the instructors asked the students on the last day of class to reflect on the low stakes writing assignments in which they had participated across the semester. In the parenting and family development course, students were asked to write about their perception of the in class writes. In the consumer education course, students were asked to respond to six questions related to the value of the low stakes writing assignments. Three of these questions inquired how the writing assignments had encouraged the students to attend class, be on time for class, and complete the online lessons. Two questions asked students to reflect on how valuable the focus question writings were for them personally. The final question asked the students to consider if low stakes writing increased their comfort in writing. The student responses from both courses were analyzed and will be used to describe the value of the low stakes writing assignments from students' perspectives. The instructors received institutional review board (IRB) approval prior to analyzing student responses.

In the parenting and family development course, students were asked to indicate if they enjoyed low stakes writing and if they felt this type of activity should be continued as a class experience. Students overwhelmingly enjoyed low stakes writing and especially the participation points that were given, with 93.1% of students indicating that they would recommend continuing the low stakes writing assignments in future classes. In the consumer education course, 92.5% of the students reported that they found the focus questions valuable and effective in introducing course topics. In addition, some students commented that the questions allowed them to express their opinions about different topics. Almost all students (92.5%) indicated that they found the online lessons valuable, with one of the reasons being that they thought about the topic in a different way because of the opportunity to read fellow classmates' responses to the questions.

While many of the students indicated that they felt they were already good writers, 71.1% said that the writing they completed increased their level of comfort with class-related writing.

As the instructors reviewed students’ comments, several themes emerged about low stakes writing. In the next two sections, we will describe the themes we identified, which included benefits of low stakes writing for both students and faculty.

The Benefits of Low Stakes Writing for Students

The themes that emerged from students’ comments in both classes were similar and are summarized below in Table 2. In addition to the themes, students’ comments to support these themes are also included. From the students’ perspectives, the low stakes writing had a lot of advantages. They felt the writings helped them make the transition into the class period and get focused on the topic(s) to be covered during that class period. Furthermore, students felt that the low stakes writing helped them apply the course content to their life and to learn more about themselves and others. The low stakes writing assignments gave them a platform to feel like they were sharing their own unique perspective, even if they did not share what they wrote during class discussion. This advantage is especially important because the writing provides alternative means for students to feel involved and connected in the discussion in large section courses or when sensitive topics are discussed. Generally speaking, low stakes writing allowed students to practice the skills that they came to college to learn: to think deeply, to be more reflective, and to examine their own beliefs. Finally, these types of writing assignments gave students an opportunity to write more, which in the words of one student is something she “needs to do more often.”

Table 2
Student Comments Identifying Advantages for Students of Low Stakes Writing Assignments

Advantages for Students	Student Comments
<i>Facilitated the transition into the class session</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In class writes did help me get “started” for the day. • I feel that in class writes were a good way to get me thinking before we started class.
<i>Helped students focus on the day’s topic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think the questions were good for getting the [students’] attention and helping to focus on a new subject. • I think the in class writes were/are a good way to get us thinking about the topic for the day. • In class writes were a good idea. They didn’t take a lot of time to complete and they did get my mind thinking about the topic.
<i>Allowed students to examine how the course content applies to their own lives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I also love in class writes! I think it is a great way for me to look at my life and see how it connects with the content we are learning. • It encourages us to apply things we’ve learned in class to our everyday lives. • It gives us an opportunity to think about some aspects of our own lives that we have maybe overlooked or failed to analyze before. • I feel like the in class writes are helpful in thinking back and relating different subjects to personal experiences. It

	<p>makes you really take time and slow down and think about the subject at hand.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think the in class writes are helpful. They take the material we are learning and make it real in our lives. They made us look at the information on a personal level. • The focus questions were a good way to put the material in an everyday context.
<i>Provided an opportunity to learn about self and others</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The in class writing assignments made me think. Most of the topics were easy to think and write about, but after hearing other students' views and information from the book, I learned more about myself and my own views. • In class writes really helped me learn about the topics better and it really gave me an opportunity to learn about myself better.
<i>Expressed feelings about a topic through writing that they might not feel comfortable sharing with others in the class</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By doing the in class writing assignments, I have learned more about myself and started to evaluate my own relationship with my parents. The writing assignments helped me to express my feelings on some sensitive topics that I normally wouldn't discuss. For me that was one of the best parts in this class, because it was a personal experience for everyone. • Writing down thoughts and ideas is a great way to express feelings, especially when you might not want to say certain things out loud to people. • In class writes are my favorite! There are some touchy subjects that many students may like to share, but not to a whole class of strangers.
<i>Encouraged students' thinking</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have never had in class writes before I took this class, but I think they are a great way to get people thinking. • Every time we would have one it would really make me think. Sometimes it felt as though I could not stop writing. I really liked doing the write about being close to a parent because it made me really realize that my mom and I are close.
<i>Promoted student learning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I enjoy the in class writes. They afford each student the opportunity to internalize the material covered and that for me locks in the material in an exceptionally effective way. They are a great use of class time and I hope you continue to use them. • In class writes are a good idea to... grasp the understanding of the concepts we were learning. • The writing gave me a better understanding of class topics.
<i>Allowed students to be more</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In class writes give us an opportunity to express

<p><i>reflective</i></p>	<p>ourselves. Also I have noticed that I have evaluated some situations in my life by participating in in class writes. I think that these assignments can be therapeutic in some ways.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I thought the in class writes were a good way to quickly step back and reflect. I really enjoyed the ones where we had to reminisce because it made me think how this class applies to my own experiences. • The in class writes were my favorite part of this course. They helped me to process what I was learning and then also to reflect back on how the information is applicable to my life. • Through the in class writing, I was able to reflect on how my parents raised me and then also to apply that to what type of parent I plan to be when I have children of my own. The in class writing also helped me to reflect on the characteristics of my own childhood that I want to pass on to my own children and then other areas of tradition that I want to start fresh with.
<p><i>Assisted in students exploring, understanding, or clarifying beliefs</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In class writes are great, it gave me the opportunity to think about certain topics, and form an opinion. It gave me an opportunity to reflect back on my childhood and how family has changed over the years. • I think it's also nice for us to have time to just think about what we feel. It's a good way to get our ideas on paper. Some of the questions you asked us to write I never thought about those things before you asked us about them! So that was another good thing. • It allowed me to explain how I interpreted the information from the book.
<p><i>Gave students a chance to write more</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like the in class writes because you are getting feedback from us about different ideas and issues. I like to write. I need to write a lot more. • The more you write, the easier it becomes through time, and in this class with the writing and group assignments, I feel it not only helped me become more comfortable with writing, but also working with others. • I was more comfortable and found it easier to write towards the middle of the semester versus the beginning.

Interestingly, students also mentioned advantages of low stakes writing assignments for the instructor and course delivery. As can be seen in Table 3, students felt that low stakes writing assignments could break up a lecture, make class more interesting and personal, allow them an opportunity for in-depth discussions and encourage them to be on time and attend class. Students also commented that low stakes writing reinforced learning. As such, instructors can use low stakes writing as an opportunity to summarize and reinforce learning. Because low stakes writing

assignments allow students to express their opinions and experiences, they believed that what they had expressed was acknowledged and that it gave the instructor an opportunity to get to know them on a personal level. In fact, students would share extremely personal and sometimes painful experiences that had occurred in their families (e.g., how a younger sister drowned, how a family would prepare for and experience a hurricane).

Table 3
Student Comments Identifying Advantages of Low Stakes Writing Assignments Relevant to Course Delivery and Instruction

Advantages Relevant to Course Delivery and Instruction	Student Comments
<i>Provided alternatives from standard lecture for learning to occur in the classroom</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes they gave us a break from lecture and that was a relief on days when personally, I was restless.
<i>Made class more interesting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The in class writes were also helpful, because it gave me a chance to really get personal with some of the topics, which actually made it a little more interesting.
<i>Encouraged more depth in classroom discussion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students would share their in class writes with the class. This also makes a great discussion....
<i>Encouraged student attendance/timeliness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a big part in making sure I came to class on time. • Being that I was getting points for it, it strongly made me want to come to class.
<i>Reinforced learning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This assignment allowed us to repeat what we had gone over during class.
<i>Allowed students the sense of being heard even if they did not share their in class</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I also love to share my experiences and we don't have enough class time for everyone to share so in class writes are great for that. • I like the in class writes. They make me feel like I'm being heard but without a lot of eyes looking directly at me.
<i>Demonstrated instructor's interest in students</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I also feel that it shows your students that you care. You usually do not see that with college professors.

Conclusion

Low stakes writing is a pedagogically sound teaching practice that can easily be integrated into all content courses at the university level. CDFR courses lend themselves well to low stakes writing due to the practical nature of the content and the applicability of the information to students' lives. As seen in Tables 2 and 3, low stakes writing assignments in two CDFR courses reflected many positive outcomes for students, the actual classroom experience, and for instructors. One final student comment is included to illustrate the benefits of low stakes writing assignments.

I learned about myself and the reasons why I am the person I am today as a result of my childhood experiences. After I had completed writing assignment four, I

realized it is difficult for me to solve conflicts because I was never really given a good model by my parents. My mother was always very stubborn and my father would usually end up backing down and never really solving the problem. I am stubborn just like my mother, and I have an extremely difficult time realizing when I am wrong and when I should back down. This makes it hard for my boyfriend and me to solve conflicts because we usually end up dropping them since I never admit I am wrong. Not only did writing assignment four help me reflect back on my younger experiences, but all the writing assignments helped me to relate the course to my own experiences.

References

- Brewster, C., & Klump, J. (2004, December). Writing to learn, learning to write: Revisiting writing across the curriculum in Northwest secondary schools. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Elbow, P., & Sorcinelli, M. (2006). How to enhance learning by using high stakes and low-stakes writing. In W. McKeachie (Ed.), *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (pp. 192-212). Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Farrell-Childers, P., Gere, A., & Young, A. (Eds.). (1994). *Programs and practices: Writing across the secondary school curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Fulwiler, T., & Young, A. (1982). *Language connections: Writing and reading across the curriculum*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.