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The importance of various teaching methods in the writing classroom

Jonathan D. Brown

The well-known nineteenth-century novelist William Hazlitt (1895) once said, “the more a man writes, the more he can write” (p. 59). And over the many decades since Hazlitt first uttered those words, the validity of his statement has been tested and unequivocally proven (both anecdotally and empirically) across all fields of writing, from literary to professional to academic. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the preferred method of teaching writing among educators has generally been to have students write. It is clear that teaching writing through writing is a well-accepted method, and its pedagogical efficacy cannot and should not be disregarded. Nevertheless, only relying on this method may not be the best approach. While it is certainly an effective strategy, applying various materials, concepts, and techniques to writing instruction may be more helpful to the learning process than simply the “learning-to-write-through-writing” method. This is because there are a number of factors that inhibit the learning process that have to be overcome in order for students to become successful writers. In this paper, I will discuss perhaps one of the most significant of these factors—learning styles—and explore how a varying approach to teaching can help successfully manage a classroom of students with various learning styles and how in doing so students will not only become better writers but the overall learning environment will be improved.

Recognizing the Different Types of Learners

The importance of variety teaching is fairly common knowledge among most educators. The different types of learners present in a single classroom demand different types of approaches in order to successfully meet each student’s needs. First created by Fleming and Mills in their 1992 study and then later expanded upon by Fleming and Bonwell (2019), the VARK modalities identifies four major types of learners based on both teacher and student experiences in the classroom: visual, auditory, reading-writing, and kinesthetic. This model is important because before a teacher can effectively teach these different learners, it is necessary that they are able to accurately identify them so that they can adjust their teaching behavior accordingly. Because each group of learners has attributes unique to that group, a teacher who has learned to recognize those unique attributes

will be able to identify their students' learning-type and then better meet the needs of those students.

Visual learners tend to be fast-talkers, impatient, and often will interrupt other students or even the instructor. In an effort to understand concepts more clearly, visual learners evoke visual images because they learn best by seeing and visualizing. Auditory learners learn by listening and verbalizing. Their thoughts are more linear in structure than other learners. These students prefer to participate in oral discussions and acquire knowledge through verbal explanations. As for reading-writing learners, they are very textually oriented and tend to emphasize text-based input and output as this is how they prefer to acquire information and express their own ideas. Lastly, kinesthetic learners learn by doing and solving. They need to be very involved in what they are learning and learn best through trial and error. For a simplified breakdown of the four major learners and their attributes see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Identifying the Four Major Learners

| Visual | Auditory | Reading-Writing | Kinesthetic |
|--|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -speaks quickly -becomes impatient easily -interrupts others -evokes visual images -learns by seeing and visualizing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -speaks slowly -listens well -thinks linearly -prefers verbal explanations -learns by listening and verbalizing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -prefers information in writing -emphasizes text-based input and output -enjoys reading and writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -speaks very slowly -makes decisions slowly -learns by doing and solving real-life problems and concepts -likes hands-on experience -learns through trial and error |

Note. Adapted from Fleming & Bonwell (2019) and Fleming & Mills (1992).

Teaching the Different Types of Learners

Once a teacher identifies a learner, the appropriate instructional methods should be implemented in an effort to more effectively meet the needs of the class (Fleming & Mills, 1992; Raimes, 1991). For example, visual learners need demonstrations and visually pleasing materials in instruction (Fleming & Bonwell, 2019; Fleming & Mills, 1992). Teachers should also attempt to integrate vivid imagery and detailed explanations of concepts and ideas when lecturing. When instructing auditory learners, the teacher should focus more on lecture-type methods; however, for best results, this strategy should be well planned and delivered in the form of an organized conversation (Fleming & Bonwell, 2019). Read-write learners learn best by rewriting concepts, ideas, and new information in their own words (Fleming & Bonwell, 2019; Fleming & Mills, 1992). They retain knowledge mostly

by reading texts and reproduce knowledge by creating texts. Finally, students who learn kinesthetically need the hands-on approach. These learners learn chiefly by doing, solving, and experiencing.

Applying the Appropriate Approaches

The importance of identifying and directing the appropriate strategies to connect with a variety of learners in a writing classroom, and in all classrooms, cannot be emphasized enough; however, it also must be noted that, as mentioned previously, a single classroom is not made up of just one type of learner. Each and every type is present. Therefore, by incorporating a variety of teaching methods a teacher will not only help individual learning styles but will also help to engage all students and create a better learning environment.

Though every student has a certain learning style and learns best through that style, for truly effective learning to take place all senses need to be accessed. This means visual learners may tend to learn better through visual stimuli but will in fact learn more effectively if visual, auditory, read-write, and kinesthetic approaches are all implemented. A truly active learning process involves listening, demonstrating, interacting, and understanding in order to engage all learners (Fleming & Mills, 1992). If this is taken into consideration, it is clear how teaching with various methods does not simply help individual learners but the class as a whole.

Overcoming Short Attention Spans

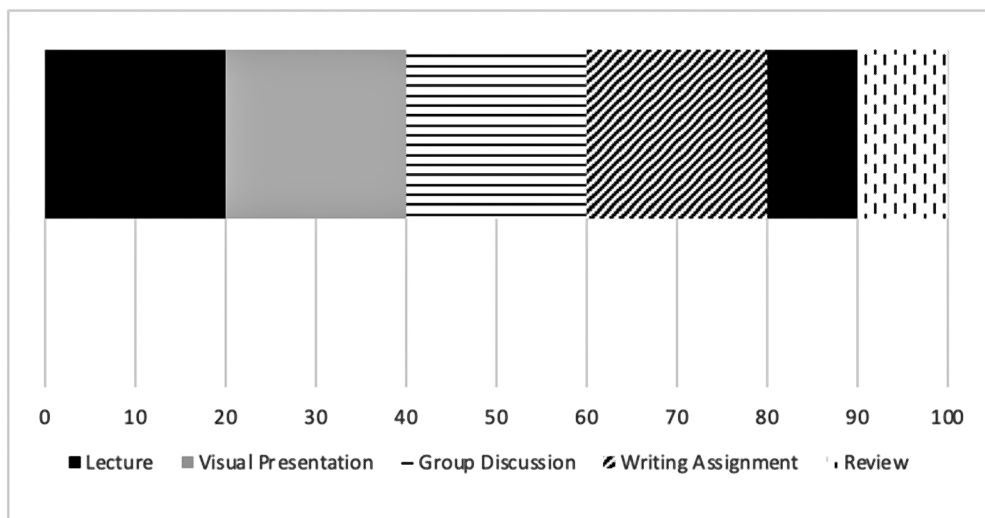
Research has shown that the average attention span of adult students is roughly twenty minutes or so (Jefferies, 2014). Since most university classes run anywhere from sixty to 100 minutes long, instructors must do something to control students' attention (Middendorf & Kalish, 1996). Middendorf and Kalish suggest implementing a "change-up" into class in order to "restart the attention clock" (p. 2). A teacher can easily institute "change-ups" by using a variety of teaching methods. This means including various instructional styles not only assists with learning-style and engaging all senses in the students but also provides a necessary change within a class period that improves the overall learning environment for both teacher and students (Middendorf & Kalish, 1996).

Consider a 100-minute class period, for example. If most students' attention spans can last up to twenty minutes before breaking, this means there needs be at least four "breaks" in one class period; however, if a teacher were to lecture for the first twenty minutes, present a short slide show or PowerPoint presentation for the next twenty minutes, followed by a twenty-minute group

discussion, then a twenty-minute in-class written assignment, and conclude with a final short lecture and then a quick review, he would be able to successfully implement a variety of teaching methods and, as a result, prevent attention breaks (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2

Model of a 100-minute class using various methods



Creating Connections Through Variety Teaching

Teaching form, style, and academic conventions without creating a connection to content suggests to students that language is nothing more than an elusive element of communication and meaning is “independent of it” (Gavaskar, 1998, p. 147); however, as Ann Raimes (1991) explains, “Content and subject matter do not exist without language. The form of a text is determined by the interaction of writer, reader, and content” (p. 421). This suggests that meaning is created through the relationship of all three elements. This is why instructors need to acknowledge this interaction and understand how to present it through a variety of instructional methods if they hope to meet the needs of each one of their students and their students’ individual learning styles.

According to Porter (1986), “every discourse is composed of ‘traces,’ pieces of other texts that help constitute its meaning” (p. 226). Therefore, the more instructional methods applied to a class the more “traces” that can be collected. Since these “traces” assist in understanding and creating meaning, it can be assumed, the more “traces” collected, the better students will be able to apply meaning to their texts and the class as a whole.

If Raimes’ (1991) statement is considered alongside Porter’s (1986) theory, it is clear to see why

the more teaching methods that are used to expose students to a variety of concepts, theories, and issues, the more their writing will improve. This is because no idea, no theory, no concept, no text exists in a vacuum. The meaning is always constructed and derived from external sources. Therefore, infusing writing throughout curriculum and teaching writing as the curriculum are of equal importance (Schuldborg et al., 2007). This is why it is important for teachers to look to other disciplines to determine course content, readings, models, and instruction of rhetorical forms (Raimes, 1991). Taking this into account when implementing various instructional methods is key to effectively implementing and teaching writing.

Conclusion

Multiple approaches to teaching writing has a very positive affect on the learning process. It is more than simple pedagogical theory; implementing a variety of teaching methods helps teachers address and effectively reach each and every different type of learner present in the class. Not only does this method help individual learners, but it also assists in stimulating and engaging students. This, in turn, pushes the learners into a deeper comprehension of the class content. Therefore, it seems that teachers who adopt varying techniques will usually command a better span of the class because these variations often eliminate attention breaks among the students (Middendorf & Kalish, 1996). Finally, variety teaching helps students make connections with other concepts, ideas, and texts. This is very crucial because “we understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursors” (Porter, 1986, p. 225). Adopting different types of instructional methods into a writing course will help students as they attempt to make these connections and discover meaning.

While it is important to encourage students to write in order to improve their writing skills, the “variety method” needs to become more commonplace because of the diversity present in every single class. But it is not only the diversity of the student that demands the “variety method.” It is the fact that, all concepts, all texts, and all ideas are interdependent and need each other in order to bring about meaning (Porter, 1986). So by helping students to learn by applying diverse techniques enables them to establish larger networks in which to extract greater knowledge and there in turn create better writing (Kiefer, 2000).

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