

Writing Across the Curriculum: A Literature Review

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As students enter high school, they must write many essays and writing assignments as part of their curriculum. However, this writing happens not only in English classes but occurs in other classes, such as science and history classes, as well. This use of writing in a wide variety of courses and subjects becomes even more apparent and prominent as students enter university. Students may not realize it but they are actively participating in writing across the curriculum. A lot of research is being conducted on the topic of writing across the curriculum by researchers and professors alike. Most researchers agree on the definition of writing across the curriculum and how to incorporate writing across the curriculum in student learning. Also, researchers seem to agree on the importance of writing across the curriculum due to the benefits that writing across the curriculum has on student learning. Overall, the research shows that students who are familiar with the writing expectations and the purpose of writing across the curriculum are able to become effective writers.

Defining Writing Across the Curriculum

In order to talk about writing across the curriculum we must first define the term. Writing across the curriculum refers to writing that occurs in the academic disciplines (humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and applied fields) across the university. Writing across the curriculum is not a new concept; research on writing across the curriculum has been ongoing since the 1970s. Research from McCarthy (1987) provides information on the topic of writing across the curriculum as McCarthy chronicles the writing experiences of the college student Dave Garrison in his college courses. McCarthy's research covers the several factors that affect a student's performance and the obstacles that Dave and other students face as they learn to write

across multiple academic disciplines. Like McCarthy, other researchers, such as Stout (2010), also focus their research on students' experiences and challenges with writing across the curriculum. In Stout's article, the author notes that chemistry students struggle with writing creatively, a form of writing that is uncommon in the field of science, but their writing improves if they receive guidance from professors. From McCarthy's and Stout's research, readers from their audience have some general knowledge of the topic of writing across the curriculum.

However, writing across the curriculum is often misunderstood by students, professors, and administrators who often know little about this topic. One common notion is that writing is primarily used in courses in the humanities, such as history and English literature, and is used less frequently in other academic disciplines. However, by definition, writing across the curriculum is not limited just to courses in the humanities. Research from Luthy et al. (2009) and Stout (2010) shows that writing across the curriculum can also extend to fields and disciplines that wouldn't seem to utilize writing, such as the applied fields and the natural sciences, respectively.

In order to provide clarification on the definition of "writing across the curriculum", McLeod (1987) researched the two philosophical bases, cognitive and rhetorical philosophy, of writing across the curriculum. The cognitive philosophy of writing states that writing is a form of thinking and learning. The rhetorical philosophy of writing states that writing is a form of discourse between peers and within the larger academic community. These two philosophical bases form the meaning of writing across the curriculum and also explain how writing across the curriculum is implemented in college and university.

McLeod's research and analysis into the philosophical bases of writing across the curriculum explains how universities implement writing across the curriculum and the logic behind it. For example, the cognitive philosophy is implemented in universities using writing assignments in all levels of classes from different academic disciplines. Luthy et al. (2009), McCarthy (1987), and Stout (2010) agree with McLeod as their own research shows that writing assignments are used in a variety of academic disciplines from freshman courses all the way to graduate courses. On the other hand, the rhetorical philosophy is implemented in university curriculum through classes that emphasize collaboration and promote discussion among peers. Research from Luthy et al. (2009), McCarthy (1987), and Stout (2010) also shows that courses that emphasize peer collaboration, such as the use of peer review, are helpful to the implementation and success of writing across the curriculum in the university. Overall, there is a consensus among researchers on the definition of writing across the curriculum and methods that work to promote writing across the curriculum in university.

Importance of Writing Across the Curriculum

Among researchers in the field of writing across the curriculum, there is widespread consensus on the importance and value that writing across the curriculum serves in the university. One of the main benefits of writing across the curriculum is that writing aids in learning in all academic disciplines. Research from Emig (1977) states that writing is a powerful and unique form of learning because it contains certain features and attributes that promote learning. Emig argues that writing is fundamental to learning because it engages multiple aspects of thinking (objective, creative, etc.), it emphasizes feedback and reinforcement, and it allows for higher cognitive functions such as critical thinking and analysis. Research from McLeod (1987) agrees with Emig

as she argues that the cognitive philosophy of writing across the curriculum allows students to think critically in order to process and understand information. Stout's (2010) research also agrees with Emig as both researchers recognize the importance of incorporating writing into the process of learning. Research from Stout examines how writing can be used as a teaching tool in chemistry and in the field of science. In his research, Stout looks at a creative writing assignment that he assigns to his chemistry students. He finds that incorporating writing into chemistry, especially writing that promotes creativity, allows students to gain a deeper understanding of the facts and concepts of chemistry. The research from Emig (1977), McLeod (1987), and Stout (2010) all support that writing is beneficial and foundational for learning.

Researchers also agree that another benefit of writing across the curriculum is that it helps students develop strong writing and communication skills. McCarthy's (1987) research shows that a student's proficiency in writing is dependent on their experience with writing and their knowledge of the writing conventions of the academic disciplines. By writing in a range of academic disciplines throughout their time in university, students learn about the expectations and rules of writing within those disciplines. By gaining writing experience and learning about writing conventions within those disciplines, students learn how to become effective writers and communicators. Building on McCarthy's research, Luthy et al.'s (2009) research of including writing in the curriculum of nursing programs demonstrates this benefit of writing across the curriculum. Completing the writing coursework benefitted the nursing students in their critical thinking, comprehension, and oral and written communication skills. All in all, researchers agree that including writing in the curriculum of a variety of academic disciplines is beneficial to the education of students.

Discussion

Writing across the curriculum is a topic that has been widely researched for the past 40 years.

Writing across the curriculum refers to the writing that occurs across the university within the multiple academic disciplines. On the whole, researchers of writing across the curriculum agree on the definition and implementation of writing across the curriculum in the university education of students. Also, researchers widely agree on the several benefits that writing across the curriculum can have on student learning and writing success. This research will help students and professors better understand the importance of including writing in the curriculum of all courses and disciplines.

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