

Writing assignments for students must seem relevant to their work in college as well as to the outside world.

Kenneth Eble on Writing in College: Ahead of His Time

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Making assignments is among the most difficult of a teacher's routine duties. We know the worth of what we ask the students to do, but for students, almost any assignment may seem to be busywork if they don't see what purpose it serves.

—Eble, 1988b.

"In general, the term paper is a bad assignment," wrote Kenneth Eble in the first edition of *The Craft of Teaching*, published in 1977. And he hadn't changed his mind for the second edition, published in 1988. Of course, the advice was no longer heretical in 1988 because so many advocates of writing across the curriculum (WAC) were saying the same thing. But Eble's saying it in the seventies, before the current revival of WAC began, shows how his views on the important subject of writing in college were just as sane and forward-looking as his other views on college teaching.

Although Eble discussed writing in other articles and books, a chapter of *The Craft of Teaching* entitled "Assignments" summarizes his views on writing and is virtually the same in the two editions; it is the main source for this chapter. Citations here are all from the second edition.

Since Eble died shortly before the second edition of *The Craft of Teaching* was published, the book will remain the final word on the subject of writing in college by an English professor who carved out a "second spe-

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cialty” by writing about higher education. As an English professor at the University of Utah, he not only specialized in William Dean Howells and F. Scott Fitzgerald but also taught composition and drew several of his favorite anecdotes from his composition classes. And as a University Professor he wrote extensively on teaching, administration, and faculty development. Along with Wilbert McKeachie of the University of Michigan, he was among the few experienced professors to offer advice on teaching to other professors—a group of people who usually act as if they don’t need advice on how to teach. (It is one of the ironies of American education that elementary and secondary teachers are required to learn how to teach but those who teach them are not.)

Why Term Papers Are Not Useful

By opposing term papers, Eble agreed with what the WAC movement would later say about there being better ways of accomplishing the same purposes. He agreed with the aims of the term paper but registered five complaints against it as it is actually used by teachers (Eble, 1988b, p. 133):

- Teachers rarely think through their reasons for assigning papers.
- Too much weight in the course is given to the term paper.
- It is too easy for students to get term papers done for them by someone else.
- Students often face too many papers within a brief term to do any of them justice.
- Faculty members don’t provide the feedback that serious written work deserves.

While Eble acknowledged that some of these problems could be partially overcome if faculty members were simply willing to work harder (for example, by supervising the writing of the papers), he preferred using other types of assignments.

The main alternative he suggested is for the teacher to pose specific questions, “indicate where answers might be found, and move students to the legwork that accompanies real investigation. As a practical matter, shorter, focused assignments in which the teacher’s expertise plays a significant part offer more chances for learning than term papers do” (1988b, p. 135).

Relevance of Writing and Teaching

With this type of assignment, Eble (1983) was connecting writing to what he had to say about teaching in general in *The Aims of College Teaching*. In that book he questioned the value of simply *having* knowledge, and he

attacked the notion that the professor's job is to hand out "packages of knowledge" with no regard to the use of knowledge. As he put it, "we live our lives within some crucial and common frameworks—earning a living, establishing a community, maintaining our health, preserving our lives, arriving at a satisfying self-identity; all of what we know or wish to know relates crucially to these" (p. 99). And if education does not relate to these, he said, it's not worth much. Therefore, he concluded, professors must reduce the number of packages of knowledge presented in order to include time for letting students use the knowledge.

This view again fits right into the mold of writing across the curriculum. One strong reason that teachers of all levels resist including writing is that they feel compelled to cover their topic. But knowing is worthless without the use of knowledge, Eble said, and writing is one of the primary ways that knowledge can be put to use in the classroom. Students can be given real or hypothetical problems to solve and can not only explain their solutions in writing but can also argue for these solutions.

Finally, in his essay, "Educating Ritas," Eble (1985) advocated yet another aspect of writing across the curriculum—educating the professors themselves about writing by having them do more writing. He said, "This would enable more teachers to be, in some degree, teachers of writing and to encourage in their students the thinking and feeling that are inseparable aspects of literary expression" (p. 47). He was not speaking of academic writing here but of writing that is "exploratory and engaging, of both the self and the world—writing that searches through the vastness of any human experience and tries hard to find words to express some part of it" (p. 47).

Where did Eble come by this appreciation for writing in all disciplines? Perhaps it came from a study that he and McKeachie (1985) conducted in the early eighties of a faculty development program in the upper Midwest. They discovered that while professors themselves set the highest value on getting out of their institutions to attend conferences or conduct research, supervisors of the faculty development programs at individual institutions said that WAC had the most beneficial impact on undergraduate education. WAC programs, the supervisors told Eble and McKeachie, taught faculty how to increase their efficiency in dealing with student papers, increased faculty competence in both teaching and in their own writing, changed curriculum objectives and instructional methods, and brought about more interdisciplinary activities.

The Advantages of Collaborative Writing

In addition to supporting WAC, Eble was ahead of modern trends in advocating another approach to education and to writing instruction that has become standard among composition teachers—group work. He (1988b) asked, "Why can't a group of students be charged with researching any of

the hundreds of problems that professional societies, citizens' groups, public commissions face every day and contributing something to that problem's solution?" (p. 135). He pointed out that many public problems are addressed by groups rather than by individuals. Thus, as he said at another point, Eble was suggesting that teachers "modify the prevailing individualistic competitive model for learning by embracing more cooperation and group effort." In *The Aims of College Teaching* (1983), he described several examples of what could be done:

A report prepared by a class on actual conditions in a single public school could be as illuminating to a community as the overview gathered together by a national commission. Finding out about the dimensions of child abuse or difficulties faced by the handicapped or the extent of environmental damage of many kinds could be a first step to linking actuality with theory and book learning, again as a means of arriving at a group report that might indeed affect those to whom it was addressed [p. 147].

In English composition courses, this is called collaborative writing, a phrase popularized by collaboration's best-known advocate, Kenneth Bruffee (1973) of Brooklyn College. Eble carried Bruffee's cause one step further by applying its use to writing in other disciplines.

Handwritten Papers

Finally, Eble seems to have anticipated future trends in composition by adopting a third modern belief about the overall gains to be derived from writing. Again, in *The Craft of Teaching* (1988b), he favored handwritten papers, on the grounds that "writing is muscular as well as mental" (p. 138). This view echoes composition teachers who have adopted ideas from cognitive psychology. For example, the authors of one of the most innovative college writing textbooks (Lauer and others, 1981) advised students that writing is so useful because it is "multimodal"—that is, it involves using the muscles (motor concepts), working with visual images (iconic concepts), and working with verbal symbols (semantic concepts). Therefore, Eble (1988b) was not enamored of word processing, "which tends to increase length without necessarily increasing quality" (p. 138). (No, he had not in the first edition anticipated the personal computer; his advice on word processing is the only major revision to the "Assignments" chapter for the second edition.)

Along the same line, Eble also favored having teachers help students see long papers in terms of manageable "blocks of material" in order to simplify the writing task. Word processing is not bad for moving blocks of material around, he acknowledged.

Other Views

Eble had much more than this to say about writing, of course. For example, he suggested that the traditional essay—seldom used outside of composition class—is a worthwhile assignment for other classes. And perhaps most important, he (1988b) demanded that college teachers treat student writing with respect, saying, “Teachers who expect good written work are obligated to read it promptly and well.” He accepted no excuses for doing otherwise: “There is no way to require assignments without committing oneself to responding to them” (p. 139).

However, there is no need to repeat here a chapter that should be required reading for every teacher. Nor do we have space to go into other positions that Eble took that relate to teaching composition, such as his attack on the imbalance between teaching and research at research institutions and the pernicious effect this imbalance has on faculty hired only to teach—a group that includes composition teachers above all. Eble (1988a) elaborates on these ideas in “The Contexts of College Teaching.” Suffice it to say that Kenneth Eble made contributions to the teaching and use of writing in college that mirror his sensible attitudes toward college teaching in general. The teaching profession will miss him.

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