

Writing to Learn Basic Principles

1. The fact that you're overworked is no excuse for underworking your students.
2. Writing-to-learn activities are different from writing activities designed to teach students "professional" writing styles and genres (those styles and genres developed by the professional community for the purpose of sharing information in public forums). Consequently, writing-to-learn activities ought to be assigned differently, written differently, and read and evaluated differently.
3. "Risk-free" is the hallmark of good writing-to-learn activities. Students need to feel free to make a mess--but to make it as thoroughly, faithfully, and energetically as they can.

Corollary: "correctness" is no more important to students in writing-to-learn than it was for Thomas Edison in the 3.5 million notebook pages he produced during his career (during which he was awarded 1,093 patents--despite the fact that his notebooks are anything but "correct")
4. Writing-to-learn activities need not be read and evaluated obsessively.
5. Writing-to-learn activities can be used for a variety of purposes:
 - To help students teach themselves--to enable them to assimilate knowledge
 - To facilitate informal communication among the class community--to enable "check-ins" on how learning is going in the course
 - To provide opportunities for students to help one another
6. Writing-to-learn activities should be integrated into important coursework--not "add on" or "busywork."