4. Mike Schmoker on Writing Across the Curriculum

(Originally titled “Demystifying Writing, Transforming Education”)

In this article in Educational Leadership, author/consultant Mike Schmoker says that having students write across subject areas, if accompanied with lots of reading and discussion, could have more impact on college and career success than any other practice. His argument:

• *The powerful impact of writing* – “Decades of research attest to writing’s unrivaled ability to facilitate understanding and help people evaluate, reconstitute, and synthesize knowledge,” says Schmoker. “Writing enables students to generate their best thinking in its most effective form.” That’s why, when business and industry hire new workers, they look for writing skills over managerial skills.

• *What works in classrooms* – Content-area writing is basically “thinking on paper,” says Schmoker. Students need to:
  - Read texts (or examine data), underlining, annotating, or taking notes;
  - Zero in on the notes, quotes, or underlined passages that are central to their analysis;
  - Write to explore, clarify, or explain how these portions support the student’s arguments, observations, or interpretations.
  - Do this kind of writing (as short as a paragraph, as long as a term paper) on a regular basis – every week, and at the end of every unit.

Frequent, text-based argumentative writing is the best way to put students on the path to long-term success.

• *Prompts to promote higher-order thinking* – Here are some writing prompts that help students make coherent arguments:
  - Evaluate the credibility of a scientific theory, a mathematical solution, a politician…
  - Explain why you agree (or disagree) with a fictional or historical character…
  - Analyze/interpret/debunk a math or science model or data table, a work of fiction…
  - Compare and contrast two musicians, artists, mathematical arguments, works of drama…
  - Make recommendations or propose solutions for some real-world quantitative problem or social/environmental problem…
“I can tell you from experience and observation that students find such questions and prompts highly engaging,” says Schmoker. “They activate the intellect and lend purpose to learning in every discipline — including math, where writing is essential but grossly underutilized.”

• Not letting grading discourage frequent writing – “Individually correcting errors on student papers is among the least efficient uses of a teacher’s time,” says Schmoker. “The most powerful, time-efficient way to improve students’ writing is through focused, whole-class instruction. Teachers should model one aspect of writing, with each step followed by student practice, during which the teacher observes (and addresses) whole-class patterns of progress or need on that writing skill.” Repeating this cycle of instruction, practice, and feedback through a lesson, anchored by examples of good writing displayed on a document camera, “guarantees better writing,” says Schmoker – with the teacher grading only a few student writing products.