

Students practice writing and communication in methods appropriate to the discipline

Learning within academic disciplines involves becoming fluent in the language and modes of communication within the discipline. Over time, as experienced members of our disciplinary communities, the methods we use to make meaning and share knowledge become less visible to us – we become accustomed to, and frequently take for granted, our communicative norms.

As instructors, teaching in our disciplines means introducing students to these norms and giving them opportunities to practice participating with a community of scholars. This first requires us to critically reflect on our disciplinary communication practices and be intentional in making these practices transparent to students.

What do modes of communication look like in your discipline?

Consider what modes of communication look like in your discipline. What are some discipline specific literacy practices? Genres of writing could include lab reports, professional emails, book reviews or websites. In addition to written communication, where can students access visual, reading and listening materials that exemplify communication in the discipline?

How does an expert in this discipline communicate?

In *Decoding the Disciplines*¹, Middendorf & Pace describe a seven-step framework for overcoming obstacles to learning. Step two asks: *How Does an Expert Do These Things?* In the context of thinking about modes of communication in your discipline, the question might be:

- ***How does an expert write, read, comprehend and verbally express themselves in this discipline?***

Middendorf & Pace acknowledge that this step “is generally the most intellectually demanding of all the steps in the *Decoding the Disciplines* approach” (p. 5). It takes time and effort to engage in reflection and investigation of beliefs and taken-for-granted norms of methods of communication in our disciplines.

- ***What opportunities for engagement in authentic, discipline specific practices can I create for students in my course?***
- ***How can I, as an instructor, model and assess students’ learning of these practices?***

¹ Middendorf, J., & Pace, D. (2004). Decoding the disciplines: A model for helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking. *New directions for teaching and learning*, 2004(98), 1-12.

The third step in the Decoding the Disciplines framework asks: ***How can these practices be explicitly modeled?*** After (re)discovering and reflecting on disciplinary communication norms, we can define and model them for students. We should then give them ample opportunities to practice using these new modes of communication. Flash² (2016) observes:

“... faculty conceptions of writing and writing instruction shape their instructional practices, and, in turn, the extent to which students conceptualize (and are motivated by) the relevance of writing to their coursework” (232-33).

When incorporating relevant writing and communication activities into your course:

- Identify the methods of writing and communication in your discipline.
- Name and describe these practices. (*What is a lab report? How is the information organized?*)
- Model these modes of communication for students.
- Give students ample opportunities to practice using these new communication skills.
- Use writing as a way for students to reflect on their learning.

Critical reflection on our disciplinary communication practices and transparency in teaching these practices to students will engage and motivate students to actively participate in the academic discourse community.

² Flash, P. (2016). From apprised to revised. *A rhetoric of reflection*, 227-249.