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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LEARN SOMETHING?  
PROBLEMS IN ASSESSING WRITING TO LEARN

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This session combined formal presentation and collaborative brainstorming with a goal of developing an innovative design for the study of writing as learning.

In the presentation portion of the workshop, I described an experiment in an Introduction to Psychology course at Montana State University. This experiment involved a treatment/control design in which the control group did conventional homework while the treatment group did extensive writing involving journal tasks, short essays, and collaborative group work. "Learning" was measured by student performance on standard objective tests on textbook and lecture material. The results (which are suggestive only because of problems in the experimental design) revealed inferior performance for the treatment group, whose scores on objective tests were lower than that for the control group. These results—potentially embarrassing for the writing-across-the-curriculum movement—seem to be corroborated by the findings of Langer and Applebee, whose research suggests that writing about a topic produces selective learning of material rather than retention of a wide body of data. If student learning is measured by objective tests, then writing-to-learn doesn't seem effective.

I attempted to account for this phenomenon by showing how the "knowledge" measured in standard multiple choice tests is different from the "knowledge" generated by composing meanings in an essay. I also examined the positivist assumptions about knowledge underlying the objective exams used in the psychology course. Rather than a setback for writing-across-the-curriculum, the MSU experiment helps undermine the myth of objective knowledge measurable in multiple choice tests. But this interpretation, persuasive

perhaps within the community of composition scholars, is at odds with a positivist interpretation preferred by many scientists who do not welcome the burden of writing across the curriculum.

The "think tank" portion of the workshop was devoted to a discussion of the different research designs and to brainstorming for new approaches. Among the suggestions were research aimed at testing long-term recall of material and research employing the procedures of George Hillocks where the control and treatment groups are not asked to recall previous material but to apply skills to new situations.