Building writing into the texture of your class:
Using writing in projects

Reporting on interviews, surveys, observational and problem-solving projects

What

• Many disciplines use projects to structure learning. In a marketing class, students might interview entrepreneurs in a certain market or work on developing product proposals for a real or imaginary company. In a sociology class, students might interview clients of a social services agency or construct a survey for selected groups in a community. In science and engineering classes, students often work on extended lab projects. In classes where culture is an important topic (e.g., in anthropology, education, sociolinguistics, ESL, and foreign languages), students might do ethnographic studies of certain settings (home, social, work). In architecture, students might be asked to create a design for a public building or space. In short, projects can be used to create active learning in just about any discipline.

How

• Topics and target groups or situations may be either selected by the teacher or the students. You might ask students to write proposals for the study to present to you or to groups.
• Planning, preparation, and analysis of results should be done by small working groups. Members of a group may all be involved in the same task or they may divide up tasks. For example, in an interview study, all members could use the same protocol questions for the same target group or each member could take a specific group with a specific set of questions.
• The groups could provide written proposals, progress reports, minutes of meetings and memos to you to document their progress and to manage the process. If appropriate, the progress reports could be shared at certain points with other members of the class. Individuals can write about various aspects of the projects (either freely or as specific assignments) in a log or journal. Finally, students may be asked to produce formal reports of their projects.
• Evaluation should probably include group and individual components; beyond that, specific criteria for evaluation will depend on goals. Much of the informal writing can serve as a paper trail of the groups’ work and individual documents would not usually be graded.

Why

• These kinds of projects can help develop basic research skills, foster collaborative work, create multiple opportunities for types of writing found in many organizations, create connections between classroom concepts and outside settings, help students develop oral and interpersonal skills, and increase students’ responsibility for and ownership of their learning.