John Bean's book is aptly named. The ideas in it are engaging; they engage the audience, the college professor in thinking and rethinking the ways in which writing can be used to stimulate thinking and learning in any discipline. But the term engaging has a double meaning. Not only do the ideas and strategies in the book engage the teacher, but they help the teacher engage the student with concepts, principles, questions, and problems of the discipline under study. In the preface, Bean states a basic premise of the book—that critical thinking and all significant learning originate in the learner's engagement with problems.

Bean’s style is clear, to the point, and jargon-free. He explains theories of learning and writing with such lucidity that readers see clearly the implications for teaching. Bean notes that

once writing is imagined as 'packaging,' students find little use for it.
Separated from the act of thinking and creating, writing becomes merely a skill that can be learned through grammar drills and through the production of pointless essays that students do not want to write and that teachers do not want to read. This is the view of writing possessed by many first-year students when they show up at our gates to begin their college careers. It is the challenge of faculty across the disciplines to show them other ways of imagining writing. (p. 16)

Bean suggests that teachers plan their courses with critical thinking objectives in mind and then design critical thinking tasks for students to address with a repertoire of strategies: problems presented as formal writing assignments, as thought provokers for exploratory writing, as tasks for small group problem solving, and as practice for exams, among others. He gives examples from various disciplines to illustrate how slight variations in assignments can influence the thinking and writing processes of students. Bean asks us to consider the difference between a traditional “term paper” on Charles Darwin and a research paper on Darwin that begins with the presentation of a problem or question that the writer will investigate and try to resolve. The first assignment leads to an encyclopedic, or “all about” paper, while the second, which grows out of the writer’s interest and demands critical thinking, leads to lively and successful writing.

The author makes a compelling case for valuing both professional and personal, or exploratory, writing in the classroom. He says that the two kinds of writing are not mutually exclusive, that personal writing enriches professional writing, and that we engage more students in our courses when we include several kinds of assignments. He describes various types of in-class writing, such as writing during a class to ask questions or express confusion; journal writing, including open-ended and guided journals; and creativity exercises, such as imaginary dialogues and metaphor games.

Bean also suggests ways of using writing to promote active reading and ways of using small groups to coach critical thinking. He suggests many strategies to help students interact with text: focused reading notes, reading logs, summary response notebooks, and imagined interviews with the author. He suggests that small groups can also be used to help students brainstorm ideas for an upcoming assignment, to discover arguments, or to critique rough drafts.

In the section on evaluating writing, Bean suggests several strategies for easing the paper load. His own personal strategy is not to read drafts but to permit rewrites. This method allows him to comment on papers as if they were drafts and yet assign a grade as if they were finished products. He says that the quality of the writing he initially receives is higher, since most students want to avoid a rewrite, and for some students the desire to improve their grades motivates them to take revision more seriously.

I have used this book quite successfully in a writing across the curriculum seminar for university faculty and in our summer institute with teachers of all levels. Bean is measured, reasoned, and tolerant of many points of view, and his ideas engage teachers and students in writing.

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