

Confessions of a Newcomer: WAC in HI 112 at PSC

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The fall 1999 semester at PSC opened my eyes to several things, but by far the most important thing has been that the keystone to a successful collegiate career is good writing. It cannot be ignored, dodged, or replaced. If students cannot write well, they are unlikely to succeed in the multitude of subject areas that we ask them to explore.

My introduction to the WAC program came by attending two orientation sessions during my first week at PSC. I had already compiled my syllabus for my three HI112 Civilization: Europe and the Wider World courses, but “WACy” ideas compelled me to revisit my syllabus in order to reevaluate my expectations and approach. I am elated that I did. Since I had no real context as a first-timer at PSC, I feared that I would be far removed from the expectations of my colleagues in the department. Reviewing the course description, there was leeway regarding assignments, and I decided to emphasize writing. In my HI 112 courses, writing comprised 60% of the final grade, and though I did not package the class as a writing course,

by chance it became one and that was a fortuitous accident.

The Tao of Journals

The WAC program at PSC opened my mind to the idea that I needed to reassess how I had composed my syllabus for the introductory course. Originally I made writing assignments only 30% of the grade, weighting student performance on a midterm and final as 70%. Remembering the misery of my first semester of college, I shiver as I recall the agony of enduring the first six weeks of chaos before settling into a routine. Unfortunately, nothing could amend the first weeks of poor performance. In reaction to that, in my introductory course I decided to make the bulk of the grade come after the midterm, yet I did not wish to throw away the first six weeks. In an attempt to engage the students, I let echo a word from the WAC team: JOURNALS.

Journal work had come highly endorsed by several people, and it was something I had never tried before. I overcame my reticence and combined the idea of a journal with the need to get students to accomplish something in the first half of the semester that would give them a sense of plugging into the course. I thought to offer them credit incentives to keep up with their reading. In essence I would reward students for doing what they should do anyway, but I justified that by making journal entries only 20% of their grade spaced out over 10 weeks of the semester.

Many students found these short journal assignments irritating, since they were compelled to work each week on the class. Students were required to write 21 one-page reaction essays in an attempt to make them contemplate what they had read in their texts. I expected them to answer some assigned questions about their reading, or at other times had them simply write a reaction—positive, negative, bored, or whatever—to the texts. They got credit for timely submission and for making a credible effort to address the reading material of the chapter at hand. Several times students got no credit by trying to turn in gibberish that had little to do with the chapter, or some got half credit due to the shortness or lateness of their submis-

sions.

Grades on the journal entries revealed several things to me. It happened that those students who scored 18 or better of the 21 possible points over the course of the semester earned grades of B- or better, while those earning under 12 points failed the course. Simply put, those students who worked weekly on the class and submitted the journals did well. This may not seem like rocket science, but it does highlight for me that if students work and follow directions they will have some success.

I will continue to assign journals to get the students to directly address the textbook's issues. I will also trumpet to the skies that slow and steady wins the race—those who complete the weekly assignments succeed. In hindsight those who are motivated to work do, those who are not coast along and hope for the best until the panic of the last two weeks of the semester. In addition, two significant benefits arose that make me wish to keep the journal entries as a part of the course. 1) They are fun to read, in that students encounter ideas and stories that they are unfamiliar with, and their reactions are interesting. For example, I had several people who were amazed to hear that slavery existed outside of America, or that it still exists today. 2) I also had several people confront difficult issues like infanticide, divorce, illegitimacy, plagues, and other “bad news” which few of them had ever seen addressed as historical trends on a worldwide scale. Students also were intrigued by the continued interplay of religion and politics around the world, as well as by the successes and failures of European liberalism.

The uncomfortable reactions students had to challenging information were wonderful, and sparked many to write insightful reactions. The textbooks address some issues that shock or tempt people into altered thought patterns, and those who read seriously and imbibed lecture information had the most probing written commentary. Students need a dose of reality, and the texts I use offer them one avenue to explore some of the world's options. Lectures and occasional videos are passive in their nature, while writing demands active participation—engagement if you will—in ideas, and

that is my primary goal.

For some educators the journal entries are busy work, the kind of silly thing we were compelled to do on days the substitute teacher was in class. I overcame that feeling by noting that though they did take up time, they provided me with feedback on the course and textbooks that was far more insightful than any standardized form. My only regret is that I did not make an effort to compile the best student commentary on the texts, lectures and ideas. They had insights and made connections that I had ignored or not emphasized, proving they had done the work and thought about the ideas. Students made connections between contemporary and older societies and noted the fallacy of unilateral thinking, even without using such terminology.

I suspect that many students were not required in high school to write much formally or informally. Several students in my class had a difficult time expressing their own opinions or perception of ideas. For those that had difficulties with their writing I asked them to reassess their approach and offered them examples, or had them verbally outline their thoughts. The level of skill development was for many students quite low, and their grades suffered. The texts and lectures challenged everybody to try to get beyond their preconceived notions and see alternative explanations, or to appreciate other viewpoints. This challenge, though, was taken up only by those willing to read and write seriously—students who had already been required to write in high school and had achieved proficiency.

Beyond Journals: The Formal Essay

Part of the WAC goal I have seen at PSC is to make students face their demons by confronting their writing deficiencies immediately. The journal assignments allowed students to comfortably write on a focused topic in an informal manner. The goal of journal entries was to explore ideas, reactions and opinions, and I did not consider grammar, punctuation, and spelling for grading purposes. For most of us, scholarly writing is an awful chore that forces us to overcome lazy speech habits, slang, and verbal shortcuts—an ago-

nizing process of trying to convey thought by word. So simple, so frustrating! To help students develop formal writing skills, I require two formal essays in the HI 112 courses and ask students to organize and “professionalize” their written expression as much as possible.

The first writing assignment asked students to write a three-to-four page essay on their perceptions of the goals of eighteenth-century liberalism. They were given the assignment, then heard a lecture on the topic based on their textbook reading. Next, I had them read several short liberal documents, including parts of the *American Declaration of Independence* (1776), *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) by Adam Smith, and *The Declaration of Rights of Woman and Female Citizen* by Olympe de Gouges (1791). We discussed the cultural milieu, vocabulary, and intentions of each author in class, and I encouraged students to speak with me or to visit the College Writing Center for additional help. I gave students four days to compose a rough draft so that the information from the reading and lecture would still be fresh in their minds.

I took the rough drafts home and returned them the following class period, and the final essay was due four days later. The rough draft needed to be submitted on time (10% of the grade for the essay) and have a clear thesis (another 10%). I had several students fail to do a rough draft on time; some never did one at all, but most had credible outlines. In the final essays the problem for many was their inability to organize and support the thesis statement in their introduction. If they had imprecise ideas, the whole assignment went poorly, but few students made the effort to contact me or visit the Writing Center. Twenty-four out of 75 students scored less than 70% on the assignment, but only six failed outright.

I was troubled that one third of the students did less than satisfactory work and wondered if my assignment was at fault, or if my expectations were unrealistic. Eventually, I decided neither the assignment nor my expectations were unreasonable. Three problems resulted in student inability to accomplish the task. The first was that several wrote their essays about eighteenth-century liberalism

without knowing what it was. A second problem was many students did not know how to correctly organize and support a thesis statement. A third problem was an inability to use standard American English so fragments, run-ons, improper word use, spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors abounded.

I have had the unique opportunity to teach introductory level history courses in the last five years in four different states to a diverse cohort of students. I am not sure if my perceptions are universally accurate, but I suspect that there has been significant erosion in writing skills demanded of high school students in many locales. Secondary education emphasizes breadth of knowledge rather than depth, and most testing emphasizes not written methodology but matching, fill in the blank, multiple choice, or blackening the ovals. Teaching writing skills is a long-term and exhaustive process, but is absolutely vital for academic and business success.

Many of my PSC students displayed weak language skills in their first essay, compelling me to spend a class day talking about writing, offering examples of good thesis development, and praising the power of copyediting. I had each student sit quietly and review their essay in class, read my commentary, and try to see areas for improvement. Seemingly, many students had approached the assignment not as part of a long-term learning process but simply as a single unrelated hurdle in their collegiate career. That mentality is unacceptable, and I told them so. Their educational careers have built year by year a repertoire of skills all aimed at gradual improvement. College professors expect that trend to continue; yet I found many students convinced that their first semester was a repeat of high school. Some were shocked by their collegiate performance and took steps to address their weaknesses. I informed all my classes that they could hate the messenger (me) telling them of their writing weaknesses, but that they had to embrace the message—that they had to improve.

The second essay topic concerned analysis of the changes in Russia from 1914 to 1939 by which it became the Soviet Union. Again, the topic was assigned in class and several lectures were

provided to aid students in seeing the kind of ideas they could address, and some primary source documents were assigned as well. I anticipated improvement in the second essay assignment for the class. Six students had failed the first essay, and I hoped to see all of those who had failed rally to succeed the second time around. The 24 students out of 75 who had less than 70% on their first essay were compelled to visit me or the Writing Center for assistance, but some refused to. I had a rude awakening. The same problems arose anew in this assignment—lateness, inability to follow directions, unclear theses—and 13 students failed. To make a long story short, those who failed one or both of the essays, or got less than 12 out of 21 on journal assignments failed the course. Several students failed either the midterm or final exam, yet had enough success in other areas to still pass the course, yet only one person who failed a writing assignment managed to pass the course.

For me the bottom line is that student success across all disciplines and in their careers is contingent on application, assimilation, and contemplation. In writing all three of these come together. Writing assignments that stimulate these activities are essential, but WAC supporters, both newcomers and veterans, must be prepared for frustrations as well as successes. Several students who did poorly on their first essay made the genuine effort to improve on the second by visiting the Writing Center or coming to see me with a rough draft. Unfortunately, a large cohort who did poorly on the first essay refused to accept suggestions, guidance, or help from any source, and followed up their first debacle with another in their second essay. In the end, students open to what PSC can do for them will thrive and get the best we can offer.