

---

# **The WAC Journal**

## **Volume 16**

**Editor**

Roy Andrews

**Editorial Board**

Liz Ahl

Robert Miller

Meg Petersen

David Zehr

**Review Board**

Liz Ahl, Plymouth State University

Jacob S Blumner, University of Michigan, Flint

Patricia Donahue, Lafayette College

John Eliason, Philadelphia University

Robert Miller, Plymouth State University

Meg Petersen, Plymouth State University

Carol Rutz, Carleton College

David Zehr, Plymouth State University

**Managing Editor**

Jane Weber

**Designer**

Alina Knox

**Subscriptions**

Angela Ricciardi

MSC 56

Plymouth State University

17 High Street

Plymouth, NH 03264

aricciardi@plymouth.edu

**Submissions:** We welcome inquiries, proposals, and 5-15 double-spaced manuscripts on WAC-related topics, such as WAC Techniques and Applications, WAC Program Strategies, WAC and WID, WAC and Writing Centers, Interviews and Reviews. Proposals and articles outside these categories will also be considered. Send to the editor: roya@plymouth.edu

**Subscriptions:** \$25 for the next three volumes. Please make check payable to Plymouth State University or contact Angela Ricciardi for credit card option. Include your mailing and e-mail addresses. Reproduction of material from this publication, with acknowledgement of the source, is hereby authorized for educational use in non-profit organizations.

©2005 Plymouth State University

Printed by Kase Printing

ISSN 1544-4929

---

# The WAC Journal

Volume 16, September 2005

## Contents

- Transforming WAC through a Discourse-Based Approach  
to University Outcomes Assessment **5**  
*John C. Bean, David Carrithers, & Theresa Earenfight,  
Seattle University*
- Why So Many Bright Students and So Many Dull Papers?:  
Peer-Responded Journals as a Partial Solution to the  
Problem of the Fake Audience **22**  
*George Gopen, Duke University*
- Claiming Research: Students as “Citizen-Experts”  
in WAC-Oriented Composition **49**  
*Michelle Sidler, Auburn University*
- Making the Connection: A “Lived History” Assignment in an  
Upper-Division German Course **61**  
*Lisa Jennings, Valparaiso University*
- The Tallest WAC Expert in North America:  
An Interview with Bill Condon **70**  
*Carol Rutz, Carleton College*
- Dangerous Partnerships: How Competence Testing Can Sabotage WAC **78**  
*Doug Brent, University of Calgary*
- WAC Practices at the Secondary Level in Germany **89**  
*Melinda Reichelt, University of Toledo*
- Note Taking and Learning: A Summary of Research **101**  
*Françoise Boch, Stendhal University, &  
Annie Piolat, University of Provence*
- Outcomes from *The Outcomes Book* **114**  
*Jacob S Blumner, Eastern Michigan University*

---

---

## Transforming WAC through a Discourse-Based Approach to University Outcomes Assessment

by John C. Bean, *Department of English*

David Carrithers, *Department of Finance and Economics and*

Theresa Earenfight, *Department of History, Seattle University*

Our aim in this paper is to tell the story of how a discourse-based approach to university outcomes assessment can transform the teaching of writing and critical thinking across the curriculum. The institutional assessment plan developed by our university has been influenced by the work of Barbara Walvoord, a pioneering figure in writing across the curriculum. We will illustrate the surprising power of Walvoord's methods by telling our story at Seattle University, where Walvoord was hired as an outside consultant to help us with university assessment planning. We believe that these methods could be successfully transported to other institutions.

### Background and Theory

*Prior History of WAC and University Outcomes Assessment at Seattle University*

Seattle University, a Jesuit institution with 3500 undergraduates, started an infusion model of WAC in 1986 with the inauguration of a new core curriculum that mandated "a significant amount of writing" in every core course. Co-author John C. Bean accepted a new position at Seattle University to help coordinate WAC efforts and to conduct grant-supported faculty workshops. In the late 80s and early 90s WAC received considerable attention on campus, one result of which was Bean's book *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. After the initial workshops, however, interest in WAC was maintained primarily by a small network of faculty who valued WAC's on-going pedagogical conversations—the "converts" often celebrated in WAC literature. Without institutionalized "W" courses or an oversight committee that monitored writing in Core courses, Seattle University had no identifiable WAC program. As we will show, Walvoord's approach to assessment has transformed WAC in significant ways.

Whereas Seattle University began its WAC initiatives in the mid 80s, it has only recently developed a plan for university outcomes assessment. Like many private institutions that weren't accountable to legislative bodies, Seattle

University largely ignored the assessment movement until motivated by a new University Strategic Plan passed by the Board of Trustees. The assessment mandate in the Strategic Plan partly responded to pressures from the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (the accrediting body in our region) but also reflected our higher administration's recognition that assessment—properly instituted—might have a positive impact on student learning and faculty development. Although the university's professional schools had conducted outcomes assessment for professional accreditation, there was no coordinated university assessment plan. Moreover, resistance to assessment was fierce in the arts and sciences, where many faculty protested the reductionism of standardized tests, the anticipated loss of classroom autonomy, the time demands that assessment seemed to impose, and the general philosophic positivism and corporate mentality that seemed to underlie the assessment movement.

The first steps towards outcomes assessment were taken when the university prepared its self-study for a Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation review in 2000. Although no assessment plan was in place, each department created—often for the first time—a list of learning outcomes for its undergraduate majors. From the perspective of WAC, it is noteworthy that almost every department included, as one of its outcome statements, the desire that graduating seniors be able to produce an apprentice professional paper within the discipline's discourse. However, few disciplines actually required such a professional paper, and there was no process in place to assess whether students actually possessed the requisite skills. When the university was criticized by NASC for having no assessment plan—and given a “revisit in five years” mandate—the pressure to create an assessment plan was increased.

### *The Crucial Question: Choosing an Assessment Approach*

Uncertain how to proceed, the university decided to hire an outside consultant. Looking back on the process, we can now see that the choice of our consultant—Barbara Walvoord—set us on an assessment path that would differ in key ways from the paths chosen by many other colleges and universities. (Over a two-year period, Walvoord spent four days on our campus, held workshops, talked to faculty and administrators, responded generously to scores of e-mail queries, and conducted several telephone conferences.) Except for John Bean, who knew Walvoord's pioneering reputation in writing across the curriculum, no one on campus associated Walvoord with WAC pedagogy. To faculty and administrators, she was an assessment expert plain and simple. Moreover, Walvoord's identity in assessment rather than WAC was crucial to her influence on campus (which already had a WAC person).

The defining feature of Walvoord's approach to assessment is her emphasis on the course-embedded assignment and on the professional expertise

of the individual professor, whose experience in grading student work is the foundational assessment act (see Walvoord and Walvoord and Anderson). Whereas other approaches to assessment often discount the professor-as-grader, Walvoord foregrounds the professor's expertise. What Walvoord asks is that professors become more intentional, reflective, and articulate in naming their criteria for evaluating student performance on a particular assignment. To this end, she asks professors to develop rubrics that specify levels of performance across various criteria, to use the rubrics to score student work, and then to analyze the distribution of scores to discover patterns of strengths and weaknesses in student performance. When these patterns are reported at a department meeting, the ensuing faculty discussion often leads to suggested improvements in teaching methods, assignments, course design, or curricular coverage to ameliorate weaknesses.

Walvoord's approach thus builds an assessment plan upon the work faculty are already doing in their courses. A department's assessment plan in any given year can be based upon assignments embedded within departmental courses and can use as data the professor's grading of the assignments using a rubric. The assessment instrument can be a paper, an exam, an in-class free-write, an oral presentation, a multimedia project, a painting, a senior project—any observable product or performance that can be graded. Because in practice most of the products are papers or oral presentations, the potential impact on writing-across-the-curriculum or communication-across-the-curriculum is immediately apparent.

### *Discourse-Based Versus Psychometric Assessment Models*

To distinguish Walvoord's emphases from those of other assessment models, we have chosen the terms "discourse-based" versus "psychometric." These terms are not elegant and do not, of course, do justice to the many different ways that excellent assessment can be undertaken. Given our rough binary schema, the psychometric approach is characterized by its empirical emphasis on data collected through a robust research design and analyzed for reliability, validity, and statistical significance. A prototypical psychometric project might be a pre-/post-investigation aimed at detecting gains in student performance across a course of study. In contrast, a discourse approach focuses primarily on rich faculty talk about ways to improve curriculum and instruction in light of strengths and weaknesses in student performance on course-embedded assignments. A typical assessment sequence based on the discourse model might look like this:

- *Starting point:* Departmental faculty decide upon a learning outcome to be assessed (for example: students' ability to integrate primary and secondary sources into a researched argument or their ability to display empirical data graphically in a technical report).

- *Instructor action:* Departmental faculty determine places in the curriculum where these skills are required in assignments already embedded in one or more courses. Working individually or as a team, faculty develop a scoring rubric for assessing the desired outcomes. Individual faculty score their own students using the rubric and analyze patterns of strengths and weaknesses in student performance.
- *Departmental action:* At a departmental assessment meeting, instructors report their results. Departmental faculty articulate characteristic strengths and weaknesses of student performance, discuss ways to improve performance, and suggest possible changes in assignments, instructional methods, or curriculum design to improve student performance. To complete the assessment cycle, department faculty then implement selected changes proposed in the department meeting.

Our experience at Seattle University suggests that this approach can reduce faculty resistance to assessment. First, the method is simple. It focuses on departmental discussion leading to improvements in curriculum and instruction. The only paperwork required is a one- or two-page annual report that identifies the learning goals assessed, the embedded assignments chosen for assessment, the patterns of strengths and weaknesses found, and the kinds of changes in curriculum or instruction the department intends to implement. Second, this method validates the professionalism of instructors. It relies on individual professors' holistic judgments about complex student performances, thus lessening fear of reductive numbers or other kinds of philosophic positivism that underlies much faculty resistance to assessment. Finally, faculty often enjoy the productive departmental discussions that result from a discourse-based approach. While clearly focused on student learning, these discussions help faculty reach consensus about teaching goals, discover gaps in the curriculum, develop better assignments, improve teaching methods, and better coordinate instruction.

Of course, the discourse model that we have just described can easily be expanded to fit a psychometric model. When instructors score student work using a well-designed rubric (especially after faculty have been "normed" to use the rubric consistently), the resultant scores can be treated as hard data for purposes of psychometric study of student performance. Comparative or longitudinal studies, using complex research designs and sophisticated statistical analyses, can be based on data derived from discourse-based studies initially aimed at producing rich faculty talk. (For assessment approaches that blend both discourse and psychometric methods, see Huba; Suskie).

What we want to show in the remainder of this article is the way that departmentally-based discourse approaches to assessment have revitalized writing across the curriculum.

## **The Assessment of Student Learning in a Sophomore History Sequence for Majors**

The History Department at Seattle University wants to teach all its majors to think like historians. To do such thinking, students must learn how historians pose questions, conduct inquiry, gather and interpret evidence, and make historical arguments. History professors have long understood the complexity of this goal. Students must learn not just the traditional scope of historiography, which is often taught as the history of writing about history, but also the skills of doing their own historical writing, which includes epistemological issues (the construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of historical knowledge), research methodology (the nature of evidence and how to use it in the construction of a historical argument), critical thinking (how to discuss and analyze complicated primary and secondary materials), writing and stylistic issues (organization, clarity, gracefulness), and technical issues (formatting, citation of sources). When faculty began thinking of its history curriculum from an assessment perspective, their perception, based mostly on anecdotal evidence, was that students were entering their upper-division research seminars without proper understanding of the fundamentals of writing a history paper. The department decided to use its first formal assessment project to address this problem.

### *Overview of the History Department's Assessment Project*

To move beyond anecdotal evidence, the faculty began by examining representative samples of history term papers written in senior level courses. With some exceptions, the department's anecdotally-influenced preconceptions were confirmed. Many student papers were narrative-based informational reports that addressed no clear problem or question, were uninformed by theory, and failed to answer readers' "so what?" questions about significance. The department's assumption that students would somehow learn these disciplinary thinking and writing skills through osmosis was called into question.

The department then turned its attention to two sophomore-level courses required of all majors—History 200, "Introduction to Historiography," and History 201, "Methods." It began by studying instructors' existing methods for teaching these courses. An examination of syllabi and assignments showed that the courses didn't focus on historical inquiry and argument. Taught largely through lecture with conventional term paper assignments, the courses seemed to be hodgepodes based on no guiding pedagogical principles. They didn't explicitly introduce students to theory, teach interpretive practices, or coach the process of historical research and writing. Through ensuing discussions, the department established the following teaching goals for the two-course sequence: 1) to prepare students for upper-division coursework in general and

research seminars in particular; 2) to teach students how and why historians ask questions and how they develop theories of interpretation; 3) to provide a solid understanding of the major traditions and current trends of the discipline of history; 4) to teach students how to conduct historical inquiry and present their conclusions to various audiences, whether in written or oral form.

The following year, co-author Theresa Earenfight was assigned to teach the first of these courses—Historiography—with the explicit mission of redesigning it to fit these new department goals. She began by transforming the department’s teaching goals into specific learning outcomes: By the end of the course students should be able to (1) analyze and evaluate the theoretical assumptions in an historian’s work; (2) articulate and defend their own theoretical assumptions; (3) do a close reading of primary sources; (4) interpret visual sources including maps; (5) assess oral sources; (6) evaluate quantitative materials; and (7) make their own historical arguments in the form of a research paper and an oral presentation. Using a variety of WAC strategies, she developed new kinds of assignments. In place of the traditional term paper, Earenfight designed a sequence of informal exploratory pieces, short papers, and a major final paper as follows:

- *Intellectual Journal.* Students were asked to write regularly in an intellectual journal aimed at deepening ideas and increasing participation in class discussion. She explained to students in her syllabus:

The only way to really grasp theory is to wrestle with it. In other words, I want you to use the journal as a way to talk to the authors and tell them what you think. I will distribute via email discussion-starter questions for each set of readings to guide your reading, but I expect you to go beyond my questions and formulate your own. I expect to see an ongoing discussion of your personal stance as a historian, couched in the professional vocabulary of a historian. At the end of the journal, for the last entry, I want you to articulate clearly and concisely (a page or two) this theoretical stance.

- *A series of four short papers.* The historical area for Earenfight’s course was the historiography of the English Civil War and Revolution. Her syllabus explained the major purposes and goals for this sequence as follows:

First, I want you to consider thoughtfully a single historical event from a variety of perspectives that will give you some idea of the complexity and difficulty in analyzing the events and people of the past. Second, you will begin to think like a historian. In introductory courses in history, you were taught to think historically (to examine and analyze change

across time), but now you are asked to think like a historian, to consider what happened through an analysis of the array of meanings that an event, a person, a social movement, a religious phenomenon, a political trend, and a dynamic of power possessed. Finally, you are asked to consider the role of the historian—you, me, Lord Clarendon, Herbert Butterfield, Christopher Hill, and everyone else who writes history—in the creation of meaning. You will critique the assumptions, biases, and preferences that we bring to the discussion and see how these a priori attitudes inflect, by both creating and distorting, historical truth.

- *A major research paper discussing theoretical frameworks that have shaped historians' interpretations of the English Civil War and Revolution.* This assignment asked students to develop their thinking through stages that included consultation with the instructor, multiple drafts, peer review, and a final oral presentation set within a context of a hypothetical professional conference.

At the end of the course, Earenfight made copies of the students' final fifteen-page research papers and presented her own analysis of their strengths and weaknesses based on a rubric. Additionally, five papers were randomly selected for scoring by the whole department. Finally, to see whether students could "talk like a history major," the department videotaped students' oral responses to questions about their final papers. Throughout the process, the department tried to discover whether students were able to read different kinds of historical evidence critically and imaginatively, to interpret an historical event in a reasoned format, and to place the event in an historical context. The department also considered questions like these: Does the student use a sophisticated and specialized vocabulary? Does the student understand the differences among interpretive practices and the role of theory in writing history? Can he or she consider how to address a problem using the methods and approaches of a historian?

### *Results and Discussion*

The department was impressed by how most students were able to synthesize complex and contradictory evidence and to develop some very sophisticated interpretations of an historical event. Of the sixteen students enrolled in the course, Earenfight identified nine papers as "strong," two as "good," and five as "weak." The department's discussion of the five randomly selected papers read by all the faculty showed considerable agreement about strengths and weaknesses. Here for example are two professor's descriptions of the strong papers:

**Professor 1:** I found that the grades awarded for this essay assignment were definitely in accord with the criteria provided to students, in a very clear and straightforward manner. . . . The structure of this assignment encouraged students not only to present a basic understanding of the content of the three historical works (which each student reviewed), but to go beyond this, to analyze/synthesize the authors' theoretical approaches concerning the English Civil War and grapple through to their own views about the validity of the authors' approaches and related matters.

**Professor 2:** They [writers of the strong papers] are able to distinguish among different interpretive schools. They are able to see that most historians do not belong to or use just one school of thought. They can identify themselves as having affinity with one or more schools of thought, and sometimes they say why in their papers. Their understanding of the different theories enables them to assess historians' work not only from the examination of theses and research but at a more interpretive level. They are able to see why historians interpret their findings in certain ways. I am overall impressed with their level of critical assessment of historical work, their capacity in assimilating material learned in class.

As another example, here are two professor's assessments of one of the weaker papers, identified as "student 2":

**Professor 1:** Student 2—Doesn't engage with theory. Mostly a description, a research paper.

**Professor 2:** Student 2—Weak analysis, very shaky use of theoretical approaches to understanding the events of the English Civil War. Can pinpoint the various theories at work but cannot really discuss them in a meaningful way. Essentially a summary without any substantive engagement with the terminology and concepts of historical analysis.

Departmental analyses of the videotaped oral discussions (N = 12) revealed similar results as shown in the following table:

	No	Partially	Yes	Not asked
Able to Talk Like Historian [to use appropriately specific historical terminology that indicates the intellectual tradition of the discipline]	1	4	7	
Able to Identify Major Historical Thinkers	2	3	7	
Able to Define Own Historiographical Position	2	1	8	1
Able to Discuss “Objectivity Question” in History [to discuss whether objective history, as a discipline, is possible]	2	2	6	1

The department’s assessment procedures suggested that Earenfight’s pedagogical approach using WAC strategies helped students make progress toward more sophisticated historical inquiry and argument. The department now plans to extend the same procedures into the second of the two sophomore courses and to assure that students take the courses in sequence at the beginning of the major. Additionally faculty now seem more confident in creating stringent research projects in upper division courses. An unusually high number of recent history majors have presented papers at undergraduate research conferences or won distinguished scholarships to graduate schools.

**The Assessment of Critical Thinking in a Capstone Finance Course**

The story of the undergraduate critical thinking assessment project in finance begins with faculty frustration at what instructors perceived as a lack of critical thinking skills among finance majors. The frustration had been building for several years and often dominated departmental meeting discussions as well as informal faculty conversations. Led by co-author David Carrithers, the department decided to conduct a pilot study of students’ critical thinking skills using an embedded assignment in accordance with the discourse-based assessment procedures recommended by Barbara Walvoord.

*Design of the Pilot Study*

To design the study, the department used a definition of critical thinking developed by cognitive psychologist Joanne Kurfiss. For Kurfiss, critical thinking is triggered when students confront an “ill-structured problem”—that is, a problem that cannot be solved algorithmically to yield a single right answer. Kurfiss defines critical thinking as “an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that

can therefore be convincingly justified”(2). According to Kurfiss, an effective assessment of critical thinking would typically ask students to develop a best solution to an ill-structured problem and to justify their proposed solutions, orally or in writing, with reasons and evidence appropriate to the discipline. Researchers could then study the processes by which students determined their solutions and developed supporting oral or written arguments.

The department’s first task was to create an ill-structured finance problem that would evoke the kinds of critical thinking sought from students. Working as a committee of the whole, the Finance Department designed an ill-structured case problem in which students had to write a two-page memo to a lay client. In brief, the case assignment asked the student—playing the role of an investment advisor—to offer advice to a husband and wife about two investment choices for the wife’s retirement savings: Plan A—taking a lump sum payout of a 401(k) plan and buying a fixed-rate annuity, or Plan B—taking a lump sum payout and investing it in a stock/bond fund. Of concern to the clients were the anticipated monthly income from each option, the long-range sustainability of that income, and the death benefit to survivors. Numerous variables were built into the case—some crucial and some extraneous—to approximate a real-world ill-structured problem. Finance faculty hoped that students would get quickly to the heart of the problem by identifying the client’s lifespan as the chief risk factor for Plan A and the rate of return on the lump sum investment as the chief risk factor for Plan B. The students’ task was to explain these risk differences to the clients and to show them different scenarios resulting from different lengths of time until death or different rates of return on the Plan B investment. Faculty also expected students to construct audience-friendly graphics showing intersections between the two options under different variable conditions (different life spans/different rates of interest).

By designing a case centered on an ill-structured problem, the department treated critical thinking in a dynamic, holistic way—as a total problem-solving and argumentative performance in response to a disciplinary problem. The department hoped to observe students’ critical thinking abilities across several specific dimensions:

- The ability to determine appropriate analytical tools and finance methodologies to analyze each option.
- The ability to determine relevant data, analyze and evaluate these data, apply the analysis to the client’s problem, make good decisions, and create an argument justifying the decisions.
- The ability to communicate ideas effectively in a professional situation to a non-finance audience.

The case assignment was administered in a 400-level course in finance taught by Carrithers. The department selected this course because it serves a near-capstone role in the finance curriculum. Students in the class tend to be graduating seniors having satisfied the requirements of a finance concentration. The assignment was given as part of a take-home final examination. Students had approximately one week to analyze the problem, determine their solutions, and write their memos. Thirty-two student case analyses were submitted.

The case analyses were scored by seven Finance faculty using norming and staff-grading processes well-known by composition researchers (see, for example, White). The department developed a six-point scoring rubric specifying finance concepts and elements of communication the faculty felt should have been used in the analysis. After a “norming” session, the finance faculty staff-graded the case analyses giving each memo two independent readings with “splits” arbitrated by a third reader.

### *Results and Discussion*

The most obvious and distressing result is that about half our students scored in a range which the faculty consider cause for concern while even top-half students showed considerable critical thinking weaknesses. More research is needed to determine whether these weaknesses result from failure to master crucial finance concepts, from inadequate problem-solving processes (for example, failure to break the problem into parts or to draw heuristic diagrams), from failure to think abstractly enough to apply concepts flexibly in new situations, or from an inability to imagine the needs of a lay audience.

In our analyses of the results, we identified four kinds of frequently recurring critical thinking problems:

- *Random rather than purposeful application of finance tools and methodologies*

Almost all students used tools and methods covered in the finance curriculum (analyzing Net Present Value, calculating an Internal Rate of Return, doing a break-even analysis, quantifying risk, doing a sensitivity analysis), but many students used them randomly, often applying them to extraneous data, and revealing no purpose or goal in the calculation. Many students were thus unable to identify key variables and risk factors or to choose appropriate methods of analysis and use them correctly. Exhibit 1 shows how one low-scoring student used sensitivity analysis in an untitled page attached to the memo.

Out of the context of the rhetorically-focused assignment, this analysis is technically correct, but it was not tied in any way to other analyses the student had done, nor did the student refer to it in the client memo.

**Exhibit 1: Unassimilated Use of a Sensitivity Analysis**

Return	NPV @ 0%	NPV @ 2%	NPV @ 4%	NPV @ 6%
10.0%	\$161,388.19	\$1,159,322.22	\$78,534.54	\$47,599.66
12.0%	\$194,564.15	\$145,397.14	\$104,589.31	\$71,252.22
13.0%	\$211,747.32	\$160,639.47	\$118,461.38	\$83,460.12
15.0%	\$246,743.43	\$191,640.77	\$146,090.96	\$108,227.57
17.0%	\$282,683.76	\$223,416.27	\$174,358.43	\$133,522.27
20.0%	\$338,674.85	\$272,787.29	\$218,165.21	\$172,626.12

- *Failure to address the client’s problem and provide the requested financial counsel.*

The case assignment instructs students to help the retiring couple choose between Plan A and Plan B and to provide justifying explanations. In many lower-scoring analyses, readers couldn’t determine whether the student had actually addressed the question. Often lower-scoring students wrote introductions that gave no clue what thesis or position they were supporting. Here is an apparent thesis passage from a paper in the lower end of the scoring distribution:

Congratulations! Retirement is meant to be a time of relaxation to be enjoyed spending your hard earned time with loved ones and enjoying the outdoors of the Pacific Northwest. You have worked very hard for the last thirty years and deserve to be presented with the best retirement payout option plan suitable to your needs. Reaching retirement has presented the question of what the best payout option might be for the next ten years. The options to be evaluated are....

Contrast this passage with the following one from one of the better papers from the sample:

This memo is in response to your question about the best retirement plan for you. You have asked me to compare two plans, which are reviewed in detail below, to advise you about any variables you might have inadvertently overlooked, and to make a recommendation of which plan you should select. After conducting a quantitative and qualitative analysis pertinent to your situation, I recommend Plan A.

The first example fails to identify the reason for the analysis, the subject of the analysis, or the recommended action. The second example makes it clear why the writer is doing the analysis, what she is analyzing, and what she recommends.

- *Inability to translate finance concepts/methods into lay language.*

The case asked students to write their memos to a specific audience, an educated couple without specialized training in finance. Students would often begin their memos in audience-friendly language but then lapse quickly into finance jargon, perhaps imagining the instructor as audience rather than the couple specified in the case. Here is a typical passage exhibiting this problem:

When the two NPV's are compared we can see what return the growth fund must earn to make it a better option than the ISLA. When the NPV's are equal at a specific discount rate, that is the return the growth fund must earn to make it the better option. . . . The second analysis conducted was figuring the IRR for the ISLA option and comparing it to the expected return of the growth fund.

At first glance, this problem may be considered a writing or communication deficiency. But we believe it may indicate an underlying critical thinking problem. When students use financial jargon, including abbreviations, as in the above excerpt, it may be an indication that they are not comfortable in their knowledge of the concept—especially when they provide no explanation of the tool or how it is employed in the analysis. Students, we surmise, tend to find comfort in jargon. They can memorize the terms, and thus feel that they sound like finance professionals, without fully understanding the concepts they represent. However, it takes considerable control of the concepts to be able to explain them to a non-expert audience. Besides revealing weak communication skills, use of jargon may thus be evidence of a fundamental inability to use financial concepts in unfamiliar settings.

Now compare the excerpt above to one scoring in the upper range of the distribution:

There are three main ways that we can analyze the two options. We can find out the value of the cash flows the plans will provide in today's dollars (net present value), we can find out the rate of return the plans will provide (internal rate of return), and we can think about the returns in terms of risk and required rate of return. We have to look at this issue within the framework of a sensitivity analysis, especially the sensitivity to how many years you will be receiving the annual payments. For the sake of analysis, let us



July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Sum of PV
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	157,806.80
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20
1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	1,225.85	14,710.20

<b>Lump-Sum Payout</b>	304,908.80
<b>Sum of PV (age 56-66)</b>	20,660.61
<b>IRR</b>	-4.57%

*How the Finance Department Is Using the Results*

In discussing the results of their assessment project, finance faculty quickly identified an underlying pedagogical problem: Students were being asked to demonstrate skills they had never explicitly been taught. Typical homework assignments throughout the finance curriculum consisted of end-of-chapter problem sets in which students performed algorithmically governed calculations in response to well-structured problems with right answers. The curriculum successfully taught students how to use sophisticated mathematical tools, but not when or why to use those tools in messy cases. With few exceptions, students were not asked to write professional arguments addressing messy problems within a rhetorical context. (For an example of an exception, see Robertson, Bean, and Peterson.) Likewise, students were not taught to design graphics that extract information from spread sheets to tell a relevant and significant story. In short, faculty realized that the design of the curriculum did not help students achieve desired learning outcomes in critical thinking and professional communication.

To address these problems, finance faculty are in the process of redesigning the homework dimension of the finance curriculum. Although algorithmic problem sets will still comprise a significant proportion of assigned homework, faculty are now creating writing or speaking assignments that ask students to apply disciplinary knowledge to ill-structured finance problems. Through an assessment implementation grant funded by our Provost’s office,

a research team is also designing instructional modules to teach students how to create rhetorically effective graphics. A long-range goal for finance faculty is to create a handbook for students on critical thinking within the discourse of finance and also a corresponding sourcebook for faculty containing examples of ill-structured finance problems, writing assignments, grading rubrics, and a coordination plan for sequencing assignments within the finance curriculum.

## Conclusion

It should be noted from the outset that the assessment studies described in this paper depended on a supportive institutional environment of trust. Faculty did not fear that administrators would hold them accountable for what might be taken as a failure to teach students to produce effective historical research or to do critical thinking in finance. In fact, our studies sought out the “bad news” instead of trying to hide it. Faculty were motivated by the opportunity to identify students’ weaknesses so that they could take corrective actions by implementing changes in curricula and pedagogy.

Our studies also demonstrate that an assessment project, to be valuable, must have substantial faculty buy-in. We were fortunate to have widespread support of history and finance faculty, who were motivated primarily by the intrinsic interest of the project as well as the hope that a systematic study of student learning could improve curriculum and instruction. Although the current assessment movement in the United States is being partially driven by external accrediting agencies or (in the case of public institutions) by legislative bodies, our projects show that assessment can lead to dynamic and invigorating faculty discussions that are valuable in themselves. Finally, the discourse-based approach to assessment that we have featured in this paper leads faculty naturally to focus on the discourse of their own disciplines. Our assessment studies suggest that a rigorous program in writing in the disciplines may be the best way to produce students who know their disciplines’ concepts and procedures but who can also use this knowledge in complex rhetorical environments where arguments have stakes and where professionals-in-training must take responsibility for the solutions they propose.

## Works Cited

- Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.
- Huba, Mary E. and Freed, Jann E. *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.
- Kurfiss, Joanne. *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 2. Washington, D.C.:

- Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1988.
- Robertson, Fiona, John C. Bean, and Dean Peterson. "Using Federal Reserve Publications in Institutions and Market Courses: An Approach to Critical Thinking." *Advances in Financial Education*, 2 (2004): 15-25.
- Suskie, Linda. *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*. Bolton MA: Anker, 2004.
- Walvoord, Barbara. E. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Walvoord, Barbara. E., and Anderson, Virginia. J. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- White, Edward M. *Teaching and Assessing Writing*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

---

## Why So Many Bright Students and So Many Dull Papers?: Peer-Responded Journals as a Partial Solution to the Problem of the Fake Audience

*George Gopen, Duke University*

### *I. The Problem Dis-covered*

Descend, please, into a memory. Recall the first day of class when you were a college student —any course, as long as it assigned papers. As numerous handouts are making the rounds and the instructor is scribbling something on the board, you explore the syllabus, trying to get a sense of whether or not this course is for you. At the bottom of the page, you notice the category entitled “Writing Assignments.” It says something like “Three short papers and one long one.” I ask you: At this moment, does your heart leap up? Do you think to yourself, “I just can’t *wait* until October 1, when that first paper is due!” I think not.

Most students look upon these academic papers as a burden. They are part of the academic bargain, in return for which they will receive not cash but credit. They approach these exercises, for the most part, with an air of compliant servitude. As a result, perfectly bright students turn out a great many perfectly dull papers—acceptable as a response to the assignment, but pedestrian, even to the extreme of foot-sore.

Let the years pass. You are now a college professor. Your class can be any course, as long as it assigns papers. You have assigned the three short papers and a long one, the first of which is due today. It is the end of the class hour. Students are filing out of the room, having turned in their essays. You have carefully straightened out the stack of submissions and are about to reach for your brief case. I ask you: At this moment, does your heart leap up? Do you think to yourself, “I just can’t *wait* until I get home and finish dinner so that I can get started on reading these essays!” I think not.

Like their students, most teachers look upon these academic papers as a burden. They are part of our pedagogical responsibility—our side of the bargain. We probably have no greater sense of “earning our pay check” than when we are writing comments in the margins of these essays. Once again, there is a suggestion of servitude in the air.

If you are a committed history teacher or sociology teacher or teacher of literature, you probably write a great many comments in the margins and

---

a more substantial, paragraph-length comment at the end. These comments often require a great deal of life-blood. Writing them serves many good purposes: (1) We show the student that we really read these essays, thus making the student more willing to put effort into other such assignments; (2) we have an opportunity to share our wisdom and demonstrate our perspectives on the essay's topic; (3) we can prevent our students from repeating in the future the grievous errors they have made in this particular effort; and (4) we level the moral playing field, since we now are working just as hard as they did, despite our indisputable power advantage. It is good for everyone, we believe, that we bother to write these comments. Unfortunately, I fear we are fooling ourselves.

These comments, I estimate, are no more than 10 to 15% cost effective. Consider, as an example, the case of a term paper that is due on the last day of class. You announce that you will place the papers, once you have finished with them, in a box by your office door, so that they may be retrieved during exam period. You spend hours covering all those pages with ink—heartfelt, professional, perceptive, incisive comments. You place the papers in that box and go away for your vacation. At the beginning of the next term, you note with hollow sadness that 50% of the papers were never retrieved. Fifty percent of those comments will never be read.

But what of the 50% who did pick up their papers and therefore have the opportunity to benefit from your commentary? They have at least three significant barriers in the way of their getting from your comments what you intended to give:

1. The comments are contextualized by the grade. On page 2, a student reads in the margin, "I don't see what you're getting at here." If the grade is "A," this comment is dismissed as relatively trivial; if the grade is "C-," this comment shouts with indignation; and if the grade is "B+/B," the comment is of uncertain weight. ("Was *this* where I started to lose it?")
2. Students quite naturally have special, closet relationships with their teachers where these comments are concerned. The comments are private: if the student wishes, no one will see them except student and teacher. As a result, students can inflate or deflate their importance based exclusively on their psychological needs to do so. Your intention gets lost in their needs.
3. Your relationship to these comments as creator cannot possibly be the same as theirs as reader—because of the difference between the two procedures. Your procedure was to read for a bit, and then comment, and then read more, and then comment more, and so forth. But when they pick up that paper, do they start reading at the beginning of the text and "insert" your

comments as they go, as you did when you wrote them? Never, I would wager. They read comment after comment after comment—interrupting themselves only if necessary to see what in their paper had prompted such a response. As a result, they are reading all these comments as a continuous text. You did not and could not produce them *as a continuous text*. Their reading experience differs significantly from your writing experience.

So far I have painted a rather depressing picture:

- Students (for the most part) do not want to write these papers;
- Teachers (for the most part) do not want to read them;
- Teachers (if pedagogically industrious) must summon a great deal of energy to write painstaking comments; and
- For a number of reasons, these comments do not accomplish nearly enough of the intended good.

Why then do we continue this highly labor-intensive, only occasionally fulfilling procedure? I could offer a number of reasonable justifications:

- For the student, to write is to think. Therefore this process foments individualized intellectual effort on their part.
- The task is an active one for the student, as opposed to the more passive experience of attending class or taking exams.
- It represents the most sustained, most concentrated thinking opportunity students can have in such a course.

But the main reason may simply be that this is the way we have always done it.

At some level, we know there is something wrong. I remember vividly an appointment I had (as Director of Writing Programs) with a Department Chair, to talk about increasing the amount of writing to be assigned by his faculty. Before I could say a word, he said, with a sense of urgency, “You know, I have always assigned a great many papers to my students, and I write tons of comments on them. [Thoughtful pause.] Well, come to think of it, as the years have gone on, I don’t write as many comments as I used to. [Longer, more thoughtful pause.] Actually, these days I hardly write any comments at all.” This is not the portrait of a man in ethical decline; it is a portrait of a man with a slowly increasing sense of reality. As time had passed, he realized more and more how little effect he was achieving for his substantial commenting effort.

The efficacy of our comments should be held up to question. What is the root cause of the problem?

## II. The Cause

I believe most of the malfunctions of this paper mill can be traced back to a single, underlying cause: the fake audience.

When a professional in any field writes, that person tends to be an expert. The expert writes so that those who do not know something may come to know it. Readers in the professional world read in order to find out what someone better or differently informed has to say. We have a technical term for this rhetorical relationship: We call it communication.

I would argue that it is fantasy to believe that students writing assigned papers for teachers are primarily engaged in the rhetorical act of communication. They do not think, having been two days at the library, that they have become the “experts” in this field and will now produce an essay in order to fill full the empty vial of teacher with the milk of human knowledge. Their belief takes them too far in the opposite direction: They tend to think that teacher knows 100% of what can be known about this subject. There is no perceived need for “communication”; instead, the rhetorical task at hand here is the duller, narrower, more burdensome one of “demonstration.” Students must *demonstrate* to teacher that they control a modest amount of that which teacher knows expertly.

Given the limitations of this demonstrative task, it is sufficient for students to treat their experience with the library (or the laboratory or the assigned text, etc.) as a hunting and gathering effort. The results need merely be “displayed” on the pages here and there, so that their capture can be recognized and rewarded. If all the right words or names or dates or concepts are included in those pages somewhere, teacher will know how to put them together. That will be true even if student has not yet figured out how to put them together. As a result, a paper full of “information” cannot fail. It can receive a lower grade than desired; but it cannot fail. Students are therefore taught the value of *information*, without understanding the need for synthesizing that information into *ideas*.

This happens naturally when there is no real audience in sight. Peter Elbow, as usual, has put it succinctly: “[Students] see writing as an exercise in trying to say ‘what teachers want’ rather than working out their own thinking.”<sup>1</sup>

And yet, is it not true that one of the best ways to get students to think is to get them to write? The solution to our problem is not to get rid of writing assignments, but rather to get rid of the fake audience.

The most handy, real audience is literally at hand. Your students make a far better audience for their own writing than you do. Consider what is at stake for them: from you they get a grade and a certain amount of admiration or disdain—the kind that they have long since learned how to file away in the

mind for future reference only; but from each other they get an intellectual reputation that means a great deal to them on an on-going basis. They will not hesitate to hand the teacher platitudes, un-processed data, and anything else they think teacher “wants”; but they avoid all such bullish products when communicating with their peers. Only older people (they think) are taken in by such marshmallowy, cotton-headed filler.

The most well-known example of the difference a real audience can make was given us by the revered rhetorician from the University of Chicago, Wayne C. Booth, in his 1963 article, “The Rhetorical Stance”:

Last Fall I had an advanced graduate student, bright, energetic, well informed, whose papers were almost unreadable. He managed to be pretentious, dull, and disorganized in his paper on *Emma*, and pretentious, dull, and disorganized on *Madame Bovary*. On *The Golden Bowl* he was all these and obscure as well. Then one day, toward the end of term, he cornered me after class and said, “You know, I think you were all wrong about Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* today.” We didn’t have time to discuss it, so I suggested that he write me a note about it. Five hours later I found in my faculty box a four-page polemic, unpretentious, stimulating, organized, convincing. Here was a man who had taught freshman composition for several years and who was incapable of committing any of the more obvious errors that we think of as characteristic of bad writing. Yet he could not write a decent sentence, paragraph, or paper until his rhetorical problem was solved—until, that is, he had found a definition of audience, his argument, and his own proper tone of voice. <sup>2</sup>

It is these three crucial rhetorical components—“a definition of audience, his argument, and his own proper tone of voice”—that become far more available to a student when they have a real audience of fellow students, replacing the essentially artificial audience of the instructor. Booth’s student broke out of his rhetorical handcuffs not simply because he finally “had something to say,” but because he had both a *need* to say it and an audience that, he thought, *needed* to hear it. That made the communication “real.”

A solution to the underlying problem appears: produce an audience that will learn something new from students by having them write for each other, in groups; and have the response to that writing be *exclusively* from them. The advantages are many. Among them: they will do far more writing than usual; they will receive multiple responses, many more pages and more points of view than you could ever produce for them; they will believe, for the most part, that the responses are genuine, not “academic”; and you will be relieved of the heavy task of writing all those responses.

But a number of possible disadvantages jump to mind just as quickly.

Among them: won't they suffer from listening to their amateur responses and not hearing the professional one from you? Won't they complain bitterly about having to produce so many pages of written work? Won't they complain that they are not getting the benefit of your wisdom, which is, after all (they think), what they are paying for? Won't you be deluged with such a mass of paper that you will end the term far more burnt out than usual? Won't the sociological problems of making students work in groups, damage or destroy this effort, as it so often does in other similarly well-meaning efforts?

Here is a suggestion for a structure for a course in any field, derived from more than a decade of experimentation and revision that is now working well for a few hundred professors at a number of strikingly different institutions—small colleges, state universities, private universities—that service between them the whole range of student abilities. The underlying principle is simple: have the students write constantly for real audiences. By “constantly” I mean at least once a week, but, yet better, twice a week. By “real audiences,” I mean almost anyone but the teacher.

If this is woven into a solid course structure, and if the concomitant problems are carefully avoided or can be readily remedied, then I predict all of the following may result:

- Your students will turn out some of the best writing you have ever seen from undergraduates;
- They will learn significantly more from your courses than they have ever learned before;
- They will be significantly more intellectually engaged throughout the term than you have ever seen them before, especially in class;
- Each of them will have a better sense of how other students think and, therefore, of how he or she fits into the intellectual community;
- You will understand far better what they as a group are and are not learning during the term, in time to do something about it;
- You will get a far more detailed impression of how each of them is doing with the material;
- You will greatly increase the sense of curiosity and even delight with which you approach the task of reading their writing;
- You will be greatly relieved to be released from the burden of copiously responding in writing to their efforts in writing; and
- You will never go back to the traditional way of doing things, unless class size forces the issue.

### *III. The Peer-Responded Journal: A Non-Prototype Detailed*

In any discipline, there are an infinite number of ways to structure “real audience” courses. The variables are obvious—different teachers, different

students, different subject matters, different class sizes, all of which may require different class structures. I change my structure for each of my courses, varying it to suit the subject material and the size of the class. Perhaps the clearest way of displaying both the potential strengths and the possible pitfalls might be to explain one such course in detail. It should not serve as a prototype; but it will raise most of the generic issues.

This approach suits any kind of course material; but it probably is too cumbersome to use if more than 25 students are enrolled. I would not want to do more than two of these simultaneously, either as teacher or student.

Very few of the details are entirely new.<sup>3</sup> We have for many years now been putting students in groups and having them write “journals.” What is new here is the particular combination of techniques that serve the specific rhetorical end of creating valid audiences, which in turn encourages real communication to take place.

In just three sentences, here is the skeletal structure. At the beginning of the term, you establish writing groups of three or four students each, to be regrouped two or three times during the term. Once a week everyone writes a journal type entry in response to the material assigned for the course. Once a week each student writes in response to the journals of the other people in their writing group. This is the kind of writing that Peter Elbow has termed “low stakes.”<sup>4</sup>

Weekly reading journals are not a new technique; they have continually grown in acceptance over the last 25 years. Usually, students produce a page or two of comments on the weekly reading assignments (or sometimes create a list of questions about the material), which they submit to the instructor for brief comments. The main advantage is that students engage with the course materials *before* the instructor has his or her say. Unfortunately, that benefit is offset by a number of problems. The instructor is burdened with a great many pages to respond to, even if that response is brief. Students tend to think of the journal as just another assignment, as a number of pages that must be produced to fulfill the “contract” established by the instructor for completing the course. Most significantly, the sole audience for this journal is still the instructor, who (the students assume) will be judging how well each student “performed.” Therefore the activity remains in the realm of “demonstration” more than it crosses over into the realm of “communication.”

The peer-responded journal retains the advantages of the regular journal, while eliminating many of its problems and creating a large number of new advantages. Surprisingly, it turns out not to be an excessive burden for either student or teacher.<sup>5</sup>

Let us say the class meets Monday and Wednesday for 75 minutes. (If the course meets for more than two days a week, choose any two non-consecutive days to represent the Wednesday and Monday of this example.) On almost ev-

ery Wednesday, each student submits a two-page informal journal entry in response to the readings (listenings, problems sets, lab assignments—whatever) to be discussed both that day *and* the following Monday. (This transforms the Monday–Wednesday week into a Wednesday–Monday week.) These entries should not take the form of a mini-paper. They should not display a traditional beginning, middle, and end. They should not propose a thesis and support it thoroughly and in an orderly manner. Above all, they should not condescend to the material or sound like a book report. Instead, they should represent the student’s *struggle* with the material. Students should write about what they do not understand, or about what they *half*-understand, or how this week’s material might connect to last week’s. They can spend the whole two pages on one point or start anew every other paragraph. They can problematize or extend or complexify or reduce—anything, as long as they struggle.

By “two pages” I mean two *full* pages—about 500 words. I define it as “one sentence on page 3.” Curiously enough, this makes a real difference. Two pages seem to be just enough space and time to get students seriously engaged with the material. You will be able to see this for yourself, when your less engaged students hand in less than two full pages.

The benefits are striking. Students come to class prepared, having read the material (or at least part of the material) on time. Even more important, they come to class already *engaged* with the material, having been forced by the writing assignment to form opinions and articulate difficulties. The normal student passivity—(“I turned the pages and followed the assignment; now teacher will tell me what I should have been making of it all”)—gives way to a more energized and personalized sense of involvement.

We usually reward students only for “success”: Their grade depends on how many math problems they got right, or how smoothly the chemistry experiment was transacted, or how well they comprehended historical influences or analyzed a piece of literature. We faculty members, in contrast, are paid more for our struggles than for our successes. We do well to turn out a single publishable document in a year’s time. Most of our effort is expended in preparing, in struggling, in doing and re-doing. Since we, the senior members of the intellectual community that is the university, are paid for spending most of our time struggling in the direction of success, why not “pay” the junior members of that community, our students, for their own version of that struggling?

Given the informal, discursive, and fragmented nature of these journal entries, students are usually best left to discover their various topics by themselves. However, on occasion—or in some kinds of courses—it can prove helpful to offer them a prompt. (e.g. “This week as you generate your journal entry, please consider the problem of X.”) There is a danger here: The more specific the prompt, the more the journal becomes a teacher-directed specific

“assignment,” and less an opportunity for the student to explore in their own ways the assigned materials. A particularly successful kind of prompt is that which asks the student to connect this week’s material to issues raised earlier in the course.

On these Wednesdays, each student submits a copy of the journal entry, not only to the instructor but also to the two or three other people in the assigned journal group. The instructor should read each journal entry *but should never make comments nor return them to the students*. This restriction is of the utmost importance. Even a single written comment from the instructor will re-establish the instructor as the true “audience” for this activity. Write “nice” in the margin once and turn the journals back to their authors and they will spend the rest of the term with the looming presence of teacher in mind, trying to elicit a second “nice.” The true audience for these journals must remain the students. Get out of the way.

Most of my classes do not “believe” the reality of this peer-response structure for about three or four weeks. They continue to write as if I were the real audience. But as that first month draws towards an end, they realize that they really will *not* be hearing from me. They also realize that their group-mates are reading with the same curiosity and interest (and intellectual nosiness) as they are. The game is on. Everyone bears down—producing more bear than bull.

I re-distribute the membership in the response groups two or three times during the term. After three paper exchanges, students develop expectations concerning the kind of response each group-mate is likely to offer. Creating a new group mix at that point keeps the audience fresh and increases the inter-student intellectual texture geometrically. By the end of the term, each has been intellectually intimate with a large number of classmates.

Since it is not an easy mathematical task to maximize randomness in the re-arranging of these groups, I have made available in a version of this article on my Web site ([www.GeorgeGopen.net](http://www.GeorgeGopen.net)) a great many such models for different sized classes. Please feel free to make use of them.

Students exchange these journals on Wednesdays. On Mondays, they submit a two-page engagement/response for each of the two-page journals they received. These response documents must not be allowed to imitate the condescending, magisterial manner of the usual comments of an instructor— (“Good idea, but needs development”); instead they must strive to become part of a legitimate dialogue between intellectual equals. Discourage any use of the third person. When a student writes, “Jamal is right on here when he says . . .,” that student-responder is writing for you and not to Jamal. As a model I suggest the 1:00 a.m. study session for the next day’s history exam, when your classmate asks you what you see as the real significance of the decision in *Marbury v. Madison*. The tone, nature, and intention of your reply, is the sort

of effort I am looking for in these journal responses.

Each student, therefore, will be writing at least two pages for every Wednesday and at least four or six pages for every Monday. For the semester, this can amount to almost 100 pages per student of informal, intellectually engaged writing. Students will be held responsible by their group-mates for seeing that they produce the work on time and get copies to all the appropriate readers. All apologies, excuses, and requests for extensions should be directed not to the instructor but to the other students in the journal group.

You collect and read all this prose, but need not keep track during the term of who has turned in what. It is up to them to keep their folders up to date. If you try to keep score yourself as you go, you will drown in the detail. At one or two points in the term, you might well inform them any work you are missing.

You should not grade any single journal or response—even for your own purposes. Relax. Just read. You will know who they all are by mid-term. And since you already know that you will not be writing even a single word of enthusiasm or dismay, you have to learn how to read these documents *without* a pen in hand. That is, for some people, the only way to avoid the dangers of the hand-gun syndrome: if you have it, you will use it.

To my knowledge, the single downside of this process that has no corresponding upside is the minor annoyance of the paper shuffling. Getting all those submitted papers into the appropriate folders or binders in your office is neither instructive, uplifting, nor a lot of fun.

#### *IV. Grading*

The problem of the teacher being what I have called a fake audience is exacerbated when grading enters the picture. It is the grade, more than any other single factor that convinces students that the power structure dictates student writing is done primarily to demonstrate student achievement to the teacher. But that is not the worst of it. Edward White warns of the danger of believing there is such a thing as a “true grade” or a “right grade.”<sup>6</sup> As a law student in 1968, I served as research assistant to a professor at the Harvard Law School who headed a committee to review the school’s grading policy. At the time, all 550 students in each class were ranked in single file, which required extending GPAs to a third or fourth decimal point. Rank in class was a strong determinant of success in the job market. One third of the students in the most recent class had cumulative GPAs between 69.0 and 69.9. Therefore, there was a difference of only one point between the bottom of the top third and the top of the bottom third of the class. The committee, to its horror, discovered the following:

- The same exam book given to five professors would usually receive at least three different grades and often five;
- The same exam book given to the same professor at a later date would more often than not receive a different grade than before; and
- The grade on an individual exam could vary substantially depending on *when* it was read. The “when” could depend on a number of factors, including the time of day, whether it was read before or after eating a meal, how many other exams had already been processed, and the quality of the exam that was read immediately preceding it.

In other words, there was no way to give an “accurate” grade. There was no “accurate” grade. To rank people from #1 to #550 was a fraudulent act.<sup>7</sup>

The further we can get, therefore, from grading individual written efforts, the fairer grades at the end of the term will tend to seem (and probably tend to be), and the less burdened teachers will be by what is unavoidably a flawed evaluation system.

Instead of assigning a grade to any individual journal or response, I assign a large percentage of the term grade—25 or 30%—to the journal viewed as a whole. These are the instructions I issue students concerning these grades:

- If you produce a sufficient quantity of prose on a weekly basis in the manner requested, it will be hard for you to get below a B–.
- If, in addition to (1) above, you are engaged, you struggle, you open up, and you deal with the difficult, it will be hard for you to get below a B.
- If, in addition to (1) and (2) above, you demonstrate significant improvement from the beginning of the semester to its end, it will be hard for you to get below a B+.
- If, in addition to (1), (2), and (3) above, you demonstrate intellectual imagination, it will be hard for you to get below an A–.
- If you want an A, do all the above in the extreme.

All of these matters are essentially within your control. They are the sole bases on which the final grades will be assigned for your journals.

I assign another 25–30% value to their responses to each other, taken as a whole. The same grading criteria apply. That puts 50–60% of the course grade squarely within students’ control. If they work steadily, they will do reasonably. If they engage with energy, they will do well. If they allow themselves to be swept up into the intellectual exchange, they will do very well. This becomes a major incentive for them, not only to take part, but to take part willingly.

It might seem that this procedure should produce at term’s end a night-

mare for the grader. That turns out not to be the case. To assign the overall grades for the journals and for the responses takes me on average from four to seven minutes per student. Because I have been reading these documents all term, I have a strong sense of who each of these people are and how they have been doing. At term's end, here is all I have to do:

1. I check to see if all the journals are there. (Approx. 15 seconds)
2. I check to see that most of the responses are there. (Approx. 20 seconds.) If one or two responses are missing (which is often caused by the other student not producing the journal for them in time), I let it go. Any student who has written all the journals and 95% of the responses has, in my opinion, written enough.
3. I look again at the first journal or two and at the last journal or two, in order to judge improvement. (Approx. 2–3 minutes.)
4. I do the same for the responses. (Approx. 2–3 minutes.)
5. I record the grades. (Approx. 5 seconds.)

It is a satisfying activity to see how far my students have come in 14 weeks. The whole term's work is actually easier to grade than any single piece of it might be. Peter Elbow has argued, "It's much less onerous to read lots of student writing when the grade is quick and easy to give and we don't have to comment" (128).<sup>8</sup> It is even easier when no grade is assigned at all for any individual paper. And, echoing Toby Fulwiler, in speaking about his letter-writing course structure, "The only fair assessment of this particular assignment is quantitative" (22).<sup>9</sup>

Elbow continues, "... some readers will naturally ask, 'But how can I calculate a conventional grade for the course if I only have minimal grades to work with?' ... If we only have two or three graded assignments and they are graded on only two or three levels, then we have no basis for calculating the final grade for the course. But if we have *lots* of minimal grades—which is easy and natural with lots of low stakes assignments—then it is no problem to derive a conventional final grade" (132). And I add, if we have *constant* low stakes writing, with *no* individual grades assigned, then (1) students are never considering the effect of the grade for any individual writing effort, and (2) grading the whole semester's progress at its end becomes almost obvious. When you add it all up, it comes to a very happy composite total: lots of writing, no grades given during the term, no commentary written during the term, astounding student progress, no teacher burn-out, a great deal of thinking and education, and a profitable time was had by all.

It is one thing to tell students they are the real audience for each other; it is quite another to manufacture the environment in which that actually can happen. But the clincher for the whole deal is letting them pay themselves

when it comes to the grading process. Anyone who wants a B+ can get it, just by making the proper effort. Does this produce grade inflation? I think not. My term grades certainly have risen since I began using this approach; but that is because my students' performance has greatly improved. When almost everyone deserves a B+, A-, or A, I see no problem in giving them those grades.

### *V. The Intellectual and Pedagogical Gains*

The nature of this structure is not nearly as surprising as the nature of the results. All the many benefits listed here are actual, not putative. They have all happened in my own classes and are supported by reports from many others, in various kinds of departments and institutions.

1. Students come to class not only with (at least part of) the assignment read, but with a genuine dialogue already begun in an actual intellectual peer community.
2. Writing becomes a natural part of the thinking process by being made a natural part of the structure and procedure of the course. Students write to learn.
3. The concept of "page requirements" tends to fade away as the term progresses. I often receive three or four pages instead of two.
4. Students tend to be far less grade-conscious and far more engaged in the course's intellectual activity. (They indicate this on their course evaluations.)
5. Students get an invaluable chance to see how others are struggling with the material just like they are. They get a better sense of who they are and how they fit into their intellectual community. They learn techniques from each other that the instructor would not think to teach them. They get to see what a wide range of reader response there can be, even in a community of three or four.
6. After a few weeks, inter-referentiality sets in. Student X comments to Student Y that her point in the third paragraph really responds to what Student Z was writing about last week and interestingly bounces off what the teacher said in class on Wednesday. Once the students are recombined into different groups, the referentiality extends even further backward: "In my former group, we said ..." It extends even into the classroom discussion.
7. Stunningly, by mid-term the quality of the informal journal writing has ascended to levels of power and elegance that far exceed the quality of the

term papers usually produced by the same students; and the writing quality of the journals is often exceeded by that of the responses. To supplement Wayne Booth's experience, quoted above, I can offer my own anecdote. One of my colleagues who had adopted the peer-responded structure for formal papers in her class reported to me that one of her students had handed in only a single copy of his paper when he should have submitted enough copies for his whole group. When she asked him to supply the additional copies, he responded with a good deal of anger, "This isn't fair! If I had known this was a peer-group assignment, I would have written a *much* better paper."

8. Throughout the term, you get to read (and hear) what students really do and do not understand about the course material. When you read the journals on Wednesday night, you will be surprised by what they missed, what they misconstrued, and what they understood without any effort. This can become a real pedagogical advantage, allowing you to change what you had planned to do in next class.
9. By our not responding to our students' writing, they are freed to "tell their story" in the way they wish to tell it—not in the way they think we wish to hear it. Being heard becomes the essential part of the experience, which brings with it a psychological gain far more powerful than we tend to realize. That gain was strikingly demonstrated in the research done by Mac O'Barr, a sociologist at Duke, and John Conley, a law professor from the University of North Carolina.<sup>10</sup> They received permission to lurk in the hallways of a small claims court and interview litigants as they departed from their courtroom experiences. One angry woman, when asked what she thought of the process she had just been through, bitterly complained that the judge had not listened to her and refused to let her finish presenting her side of the story. She was totally dissatisfied with her day in court. *And she had won.* After many months of these experiences, O'Barr and Conley concluded that people feel that court—especially small claims court—is a place not to seek justice, but to be fully heard. This intense human need is almost fully satisfied by the peer-responded journal course structure, where the presence of the non-judgmental teacher-judge becomes enabling rather than intimidating. It produces what Peter Elbow calls a "safe audience," not a "dangerous audience,"<sup>11</sup> which induces a climate in which telling one's story is quietly facilitated. The students' texts are no longer "appropriated" by the instructor.<sup>12</sup>
10. You will, I predict, enjoy reading your students' writing more than you ever have before. When those journals are being handed to you on Wednesday,

you may actually think, “I just can’t wait until I get home and finish dinner so that I can start reading what they have to say this week!”<sup>13</sup>

#### *VI. Other Problems You Would Think to Have But Probably Will Not*

With so many pages for students to write and instructors to read, it would seem likely that the course would sink under its own weight. That turns out not to be the case. Here are a few of the fears that seem logical but prove unwarranted.

##### 1. Won’t the students complain bitterly about having to write so many pages?

Surprisingly, this has not yet happened. Students greatly enjoy reading each others’ work. (They tell me this explicitly on a regular basis.) They recognize that the “price” of that benefit is their turning out writing of their own. The steady stream of writing becomes a procedure for thinking. They accept it in the same way they do the presence of problem sets in math or labs in chemistry. Much of the normal anxiety that attends writing assignments is allayed by the absence of individual grades. Best of all, the course becomes a much richer intellectual experience than it otherwise would have been. A great majority report on the course evaluation that it was “worth the effort.”

##### 2. Won’t the teachers complain bitterly about having to read so many pages?

Although the first two or three submissions may demand slow reading—in order to discover the intellectual personalities of the individual students—reading speed increases dramatically thereafter. The total time during the term reading all their journals and responses is likely to be far less than that required for responding to “three short papers and a long.” It really *is* interesting to see what they have to say to each other. It becomes part of your class preparation time. Reading becomes far more of a pleasure when you do it without a pen in your hand. The course becomes a richer experience for you, too.

##### 3. Won’t students become anxious about not receiving any grades until the end of the term?

In the first class meeting, I announce that anyone who is troubled by not knowing “where they stand” may come to my office and discuss their progress. They rarely come. Constantly reading their classmates’ work, they tend to know if they are holding up their end of the bargain.

#### *VII. The Advantage of Recursivity*

In our effort to achieve maximum “coverage” in courses in any discipline, we tend to move as briskly as possible from one assignment to another.

I think there is a great need for recursivity in education—and very little opportunity to experience it. In a standard course structure, the student usually encounters a given unit of material only twice—reading it and listening to the professor talk about it. With the peer-response journal structure, opportunities for recursivity abound:

1. Student reads two days' assignments
2. Student writes the journal.
3. Instructor gives first class on the assignment.
- 4–6. Student reads the journals of three group-mates.
- 7–9. Student responds to journals of three group-mates.
10. Instructor gives the second class.
- 11–13. Student reads the responses from three group-mates.

These multiple opportunities to re-encounter material produce possibilities for significant learning experiences that are usually unavailable under the traditional schemes. Notice how much more work gets accomplished by students; and notice how relatively little additional effort needs to be made by the instructor. Here is an example of this recursivity at work.

The assignment for the week was to analyze the structures and substance of three poems, including “The Garden of Proserpine,” by Charles Algernon Swinburne. This poem comes to its climax expressing the great relief one can take from the fact that death exists. Here is its penultimate stanza:

From too much love of living,  
From hope and fear set free,  
We thank with brief thanksgiving  
Whatever gods may be  
That no life lives forever;  
That dead men rise up never;  
That even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Roberta wrote a three-page journal entry, but devoted only three sentences to the Swinburne poem:

I found Swinburne's poem, “The Garden of Proserpine,” to be methodical, drawn-out, and boring. Surely there is more to it than that, so how am I misreading it? Will somebody please enlighten me?

In most classes, that might be it for Roberta and Swinburne. The instructor might or might not spend much time on the poem; and Roberta might or might not attend that class. But in this class, Roberta had to re-encounter the poem numerous times as she read and responded to the journals of others who were engaging with it, and then read their responses to her own journal. Watch how that recursivity gave her a chance to re-encounter the poem and grow in the understanding of both it and herself. Here is an excerpt from Lonny's response to Roberta:

I'm with you in thinking that "The Garden of Proserpine" was pretty methodical and boring. As I wrote to Mark, I enjoyed how the poem *sounded*, but I didn't pay too much attention the first few times to what the poem was saying. But if there's one thing that I have learned in this class, it's that even the poems that seem the most straightforward have so much meaning hidden behind their surfaces once you start digging around.

Roberta then read Ted's journal, who had written four pages on potential religious interpretations of the poems. In his response to Roberta, he applied what he had already written to that which she had written.

Then Roberta got a different perspective, as she read the response from Sandra:

I struggled some with the Swinburne poem, too. It seemed to offer very few surprises. It just repeated over and over that the only sure thing is death. Maybe the answer lies within that. The poem's structure, word choice, alliteration, etc., also seem to point toward that one bleak path, death. I asked myself how the CCC rhyme scheme functioned. It seemed to just make you wait for a depressing end/last line. For example, some of the last lines were "And no such things grow here," "In the end it is not well," "Weeps that no loves endure." In other words, death will come eventually. The second to last stanza seemed to present the idea of being glad that we have to die!?!

And on went Sandra for two more pages.

Roberta had to rethink her dismissal of the Swinburne poem as boring—not just because she was reading the work of Lonny and Ted and Sandra, but also because she had to write back to these three people. Here are excerpts from her response to Lonny:

As you could probably tell from my journal, I did not take too fondly to that poem. What I found, interestingly enough, is that reading the Proserpine poem this time around was not nearly as painful, now that I under-

stand who Proserpine is. In addition, I am wary about “conscending” to the material because I am sure that it can be a great poem in its own right. On with my discussion . . .

Notice that Roberta now speaks of the poem as having been “painful”—which is significantly different from “boring.” Something is happening.

Then she responded to Ted at some length. Here is her opening gambit:

I appreciate your approach to relating these three poems because it allowed me to take a look at them in a different light, particularly “The Garden of Proserpine.” You seem to have come up with quite a few examples of strong anti-religious (is that the way to phrase it?) language used in the poem. It makes sense then that the central character of the poem is out of mythology; not so much because mythology is “anti-religion,” but just on a different plane or level than religion based on the Bible. For me, the poem seems to be about a guy with no hope to live. He sounds like a guy who is terminally ill, just waiting for the relief which death will bring. He is tired of the emotions associated with living, and he is looking for an escape.

She was starting to understand something about why the poem was written. Then, in responding to Sandra, she finally began to understand her original rejection of the Swinburne poem:

With poetry, I usually wonder what it is that I can take away from it, or what does it add to me as a person? This is part of my problem with this poem—the poem is just so bleak. If neither sorrow, nor joy, nor love last, what does a young person like myself have to look forward to here and now? In fact, I resent Swinburne for trivializing life. Yes, it is such a small speck of the eternal, if one believes in the eternal, but why not enjoy it for what it’s worth. Swinburne is just such a downer is he not?

It is an “aha!” moment. She had gone from “boring” to “painful” to “I resent Swinburne for trivializing life.” Here she is, Roberta, 20 years old, busily, almost frantically, trying to open doors and create opportunities and *prepare* for life; and along comes Swinburne with his poem that says, “Thank God it all ends some time.” Of course she might well resent the poem; but at least now, because of the recursive opportunities to write (for “write” understand “think”) about it, she has had a chance to recognize and deal with that resentment.

Compare that to Roberta’s encountering this poem in a traditionally

structured class: she would have read the poem, somewhat passively, and then listened to the instructor lecture about it or lead a discussion about it. She would have taken notes, perhaps. And that would have been it. Perhaps she would have re-encountered it in studying for an exam.

It seems, then, that multiple, peer-responded writing assignments not only help students to become better writers, but also to become more thoughtful, more mature thinkers. That is a substantial gain. And equally large is the gain on the part of the instructor—the ability to watch what is going on in the minds of the students.

### *VIII. Instructor Feedback*

You may be wondering how all this writing and responding can be taking place without any direct feedback from the instructor. In some ways students are better off with the decreased magisterial feedback, and they do get plenty of feedback. A student who writes 20–30 pages of journals during a term will receive back 60–90 pages of comments from fellow students. The same student would be likely to receive a total of 2–3 pages back from the instructor. Quantity tends to compensate for whatever particular points of professional insight might have been lost along the way.

It is more than difficult to try to combine the two—student feedback and professorial input. When the two are simultaneous, all the instructor’s comments seem to put themselves forward as “the right ones”; that leaves the student comments to succeed or fail to live up to the instructions. It also puts extraordinary pressure on the instructor to be not only brilliant but also comprehensive in his or her commentary. Let the students have their say. If they have missed something crucial, you can always produce that insight in the class hour.

Feedback from the instructor can be made in other forms. I discuss the journals and the responses generically in the classroom setting. I tend to take a few minutes of class time when the first sets of journals and responses are submitted, letting the class know whether they as a whole are producing the “struggle” and “engagement” requested—as opposed to writing mini-papers and “judging” the work of others. I repeat this in-class assessment when the second set of journals/responses appear, if necessary. If a given student continues to have problems, or if any inter-personal difficulties (which tend to be rare) develop, I meet individually with that particular student.

If several students have noticed the same interesting thing in their journals, it does no harm to mention this in class, or to expand further on the observations. I have found, however, that it does great damage to single out a particular person for praise on the basis of some stunning insight reported in his or her journal. If I want to share that insight with the class as a whole, I tell a benevolent lie and report that “a number of people brought up this interest-

ing point.” The actual author receives the deserved praise, but the rest of the students do not feel they must now impress me so that they might be the star of some future class hour.

I meet with each student individually in about the fourth week of term—and usually again in the ninth week. Behind those closed doors it has proved perfectly appropriate to comment on how the student is faring on the journals and the responses.

### *IX. Electronic alternatives*

The existence of e-mail multiplies the number of ways in which students can communicate with each other. The advantages of e-mail are clear—less paper waste, less paper shuffling, easy delivery. One significant advantage of hard copy should be mentioned—the sociological bonding that results in every class hour, as the group members have to face each other while shuffling papers back and forth. (On e-mail, some group members remain faceless throughout the term.) It is a joy to walk into class and find your students already engaged in small groups, not only shuffling the papers, but often talking about the subject matter. Class has already begun, without you having uttered your first word.

### *X. Regulation and Cancellation*

This journal process should take place every week, with the exception of the weeks in which formal writing is due. Instructors who have used the journals only now and again find that the cumulative effect of the good work habits fails to materialize. Ironically, students come to view intermittently assigned journals as an extra assignment burden. They also lose the benefits gained from the close-knit group experience generated by the continually interchanged writing.

Towards the end of the term, it may prove efficacious to cancel one or two of the final journal assignments, when students are burdened by increased responsibilities in other courses. Caution: those cancellations should be done at the last moment. They should not be written into the course syllabus, but rather should appear as a gift. Instructors who have written into the syllabus an early end to the journal assignments have reported that students quickly revert to their passive reading behavior and often come to class unprepared. That tends not to happen when they receive their vacation as an unexpected windfall.

### *XI. The Inclusion of Formal Writing*

As transforming as all this informal writing can be, it does not eliminate the need for formal writing experiences. At some point in the term, as Peter Elbow suggests, low stakes writing should be complemented by high stakes

writing. The peer-responded journal structure does, however, make possible a collaborative form of formal enterprise that does not function as well under more traditional course structures. I assign one eight-page paper per term.

I believe strongly in the efficacy of collaborative learning. Formal group projects, however, have traditionally run into a number of serious problems: Someone in the group does not make a reasonable contribution; someone in the group has too much drive and tries to commandeer the project; more than one person tries to be in charge; and there is a constant sense of unfairness concerning how much of a contribution everyone is making.

Formal group projects can work wonderfully well, however, under two conditions: (1) The students have already learned how to function in groups; and (2) the assignment is structured so that each person feels everyone is doing an individual piece of work, feels everyone is working with each other individual in the group, and feels the group is working together as a whole unit. The peer-responded journal structure takes care of the first of these. Let me add to that a structure to accomplish the second objective.

I divide the class into groups of four students, populated differently from any of the previous journal groups. In order to produce a combination of individual work and group work, I structure the paper assignment in one of two ways, depending on the course material: Either there is a central text or group of texts, for which each person will find a different perspective; or there is a perspective or technique in common that each person will apply to a different text. The important elements are that they share something and that everyone has something to call their own.

The procedure for producing this formal work encompasses five stages, which stretch throughout the 14 weeks of the term.

*Stage 1:* In week #2 the groups meet to select their communal task or topic, often from a list of my suggestions. I make it a rule that no two groups may choose the same topic: first come, first served. This creates a moment of high anxiety, as groups scramble to get their selection in before they are scooped by some other group. Anxiety serves well as a catalyst for bonding. Whether they get their choice or not both can add to the communal experience: If they get their choice, they have now succeeded as a group; if they fail to get their choice, the bonding is even more potent, since shared suffering forms even stronger bonds than shared success.

*Stage 2:* In week #3 each group meets with me, as a group, to discuss the shape and substance of the project and to choose who will do what. More bonding.

*Stage 3:* In week #9 each individual turns in a working draft of his or her essay. This is a task each has done as an individual; no group work was necessary.

By “working draft,” I do not mean what they have come to know as a “rough draft.” It should be only about 65% the length of the final essay. It should comprise lots of starts and stops at composing various parts of the text. It should probably lack an opening and closing paragraph. It should be dotted with square brackets—[ ]—in which are comments and questions from the author to the others in the group. Examples: [“Have I gone into enough detail here for you to understand my point?”] [“Do you think this connects well enough with Part II that precedes it?”] [“I’m having trouble squaring this with the point I made on the top of p.3. Any suggestions?”] These working drafts are submitted to me and are circulated amongst all members of the project group. I make no comments on them.

*Stage 4:* In Week #11 each student produces seven pages of commentary on each of the working drafts in the group. These should be written in the nature and spirit of the responses to the journals used in the rest of the course: No condescension; no meanness; no speaking *ex cathedra*. In trying to generate as much volume here as possible, I assign a grade to this commentary, worth about 5% of the term grade. Anyone who generates seven pages of genuine commentary per draft receives an A. One may also get an A by writing truly insightful comments that do not extend all the way to seven pages. In this stage, each individual will be interacting one-on-one with every other person in the group. That is a good half-way step between functioning as an individual and functioning as a group.

*Stage 5:* Week #13 marks the due date for the final project. All four essays are to be submitted together as a single, bound document, with continuous pagination and a table of contents. Students must collaborate as a group for two purposes: (1) They must decide which order will best present these essays. Each essay but the last one should end not with the circular “So here is what I told you I would tell you” paragraph so commonly found in such essays, but rather with an elegant move that brings one essay to closure while simultaneously introducing the next. (2) They communally produce a four-page Introduction, *not* to advertize the contents of the individual essays, but rather to examine the experience of collaborative effort.

To review the sociological progression here: First a number of strangers are made into a viable small group by sharing in a selection task they can do as a group and sharing in its outcome. Then the groups gains further identity by meeting with the instructor to discuss the project. Then each person works individually for half a term, preparing the working draft. Then each person works one-on-one with each of the others by writing commentary. Finally, the group functions as a whole, ordering the essays, writing a communal Introduction, and attending to all the details of presentation.

I usually allow about 40% of the term grade to attach to this term-long project, divided as follows: a grade for the student's individual essay (25%); a grade for the effort each student made in commenting (5%); and a grade assigned to the volume as a whole, which applies to each individual member of the group (10%). This latter grade, however, cannot be used to lower the course grade of any individual. In other words, it can help them, but it cannot hurt them. Again the grading has been put more in the control of the individual student than is usually the case.

I cancel the journal/response assignment for any week in which writing is due for the final project. Since I usually do not assign journals for Week #14, and often cancel one week in the last third of the term (perhaps Week 10 or 12), they wind up writing nine journal/response weeks and one final project, for a total that approaches 100 pages. By the end of the term, they have learned a remarkable amount from each other, in addition to whatever they have learned from me.

Taken together, this group project and the peer-responded journals create a different kind of intellectual atmosphere in the classroom. Students engage with the course material and with each other in active, energetic ways. It forces a shift away from the traditionally competitive academic experience and in its place valorizes the collaborative.

I have given workshops on this course structure at a number of different kinds of institutions—everything from modest small colleges to large state universities. One question I have been constantly asked deserves note here: people wonder whether this structure, which works so well on my students at Duke University, as bright a group of undergraduates as can be found, will work for a broader range of student abilities. They have, in time, answered their own question by the remarkable successes they have experienced with their own students. What we are after here is (1) the richer engagement of students in the learning process, and, as a result, (2) marked improvement in the students from the beginning of the term to the end. These things happen no matter what level of comprehension and ability the students have at the start. It is the net gain that counts.

I have always loved teaching, and my students have always understood that. As a result, I regularly used to receive glowing evaluations, with most of the commentary focused on how well I had performed. Since shifting to this peer-response structure, my evaluations have changed significantly. Now they say things like “This is the richest, most exciting intellectual experience I have had in college. I was so lucky to have found such an outstanding group of fellow students. And oh yes, the professor was good, too.” I have become a footnote in my own evaluations—which is just where I want to be.

## Endnotes

1. Elbow, Peter. "Grading Student Writing: Making It Simpler, Fairer, Clearer." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 127-140.
2. Booth, Wayne. "The Rhetorical Stance." 14 *College Composition and Communication*. (1963), 139-45.
3. The bibliography on response to student writing and the use of peer journals is extensive. Much of what has already been said can be used to vary or complement the model I am proposing. To survey the field, start with Chris. M. Anson, John E. Schwiebert, and Michael M. Williamson's *Writing Across the Curriculum: An Annotated Bibliography*. Westport CN: Greenwood Press, 1993. Chris Anson has been prolific in his contributions: *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research*, Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989; *The WAC Casebook: Sources for Faculty Reflection and Program Development*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002. Of special help would be John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Theory, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996, which has an excellent bibliography for further exploration. It is also interesting to contemplate the work on teacher responses to student papers, to see how much of that good advice is naturally implemented by peer response when the teacher falls silent. The best place to start such a search is with Nancy Sommers' ground-breaking article, "Responding to Student Writing." 33 *College Composition and Communication* (1982), 148-56.
4. Peter Elbow. "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Writing" *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 5-13. "When I am clear and honest with students about the fact that I need to require more writing from them than I can comment on, I help them fairly quickly get over any feelings of deprivation or resentment. Most students come to appreciate and benefit from the freedom of this private writing." (9)
5. An interesting effort parallel to this, but different, is explained by Toby Fulwiler in his "Writing Back and Forth: Class Letters." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 15-25. (In fact, all the articles in this excellent critical anthology are worth reading.) Fulwiler writes letters back and forth with his students on a weekly basis. "Weekly letters promote the give and take of learning rather than the finality of testing and measuring"(15). He calls these letters "journals with an audience" (20). "Letters lower your expectations. (It's just a letter.) A letter is a sample of what's on a writer's mind at the moment of writing, not of his or her comprehension or literacy or worth. There can always be another

letter—better, more thoughtful, more complete, literate, clever, or profound. Letters leave the door open. The only fair assessment of this particular assignment is quantitative” (22). To use this letter format, however, the instructor must produce a substantial amount of prose on a regular basis and is burdened with a perceived need to respond to everything of value that is raised by the voluminous student writing. The model I propose is far less burdensome on the instructor and removes the sense of a need for thorough “coverage” of every student idea raised. The writing produced is quite literally “journals with an audience.” For further discussion on letter-writing assignments, see Art Young’s “Mentoring, Modeling, Monitoring, Motivating: Response to Students’ Ungraded Writing as Academic Conversation” in *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 27-40.

6. Edward White. “Language and Reality in Writing Assignments,” 41 *CCC*, 1990,
7. For published research on this problem, see C. Raimondino, “A Factorial Analysis of the Evaluation of Scholastic Compositions in the Mother Tongue,” *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 30 (1959) 242-51 and P. Diedrich, J.W. French, and S. Carlton, “Factors in Judgments of Writing Ability,” *Educational Testing Service Research Bulletin* (Princeton, NJ, 1961), and F.I. Godshalk et al, *The Measurement of Writing Ability* (NY: 1966). These studies are considered by E.D. Hirsch in the final chapter of *The Philosophy of Composition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
8. Elbow, Peter. “Grading Student Writing: Making It Simpler, Fairer, Clearer.” *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 127-140.
9. See endnote 5, above.
10. John M. Conley and William M. O’Barr. *Just Words: Law, Language, and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
11. Peter Elbow. *Writing with Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, 184.
12. Elbow (1981) 149, in commenting on the work of Nancy Sommers, Lil Brannon, and C.H. Knoblauch on the “appropriation” of student texts by teachers. See Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, “On Student’s Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher response.” *CCC* 33 (May 1982) 157-166: “By making elaborate corrections on student writing, teachers appear to be showing the discrepancy between what the writing has actually achieved and what ideal writing ought to look like, perhaps with the conviction that any student who perceives the difference can also narrow it. But this correcting also tends to show students that the teacher’s agenda

is more important than their own, that what they wanted to say is less relevant than the teacher's impression of what they should have said" (158). This also increases the sense of the teacher actually "listening." Donald Murray has spent a career increasing the listenability factor: "Listening is not a normal composition teacher's skill. We tell and they listen." Donald M. Murray. "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader." CCC 33 (May 1982) 140-147.

13. See M Elizabeth Sargent, "Peer Response to Low Stakes Writing in a WAC Literature Classroom." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 41-52. This is an excellent article from someone who sees many, and I do mean many, of the same advantages as I have found and has bravely allowed her students to enter into the process of constant peer response. The major difference: she maintains a great deal of control over the first few weeks of the process, highlighting and commenting on their first efforts to model what good peer response should be like. There cannot be many people with the combination of energy and devotion that she manifests throughout the process. I have trusted my students to figure it out on their own more than she has. I use far less energy than she does, but seem to gain the same results. I urge you to read what she has to say.

## Works Cited

- Anson, Chris., M. John E. Schwiebert, and Michael M. Williamson. *Writing Across the Curriculum: An Annotated Bibliography*. Westport CN: Greenwood Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research*, Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The WAC Casebook: Sources for Faculty Reflection and Program Development*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Theory, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, San Francisco: Jolley-Bass, 1996.
- Booth, Wayne. "The Rhetorical Stance." 14 *College Composition and Communication* (1963), 139-45.
- Brannon, Lil and C.H. Knoblauch, "On Student's Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher response." CCC 33 (May 1982) 157-166. Conley, John M. and William M. O'Barr. *Just Words: Law, Language, and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Diedrich, P., J.W. French, and S. Carlton, "Factors in Judgments of Writing Ability," *Educational Testing Service Research Bulletin* (Princeton, NJ, 1961)
- Elbow, Peter. "Grading Student Writing: Making It Simpler, Fairer, Clearer." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

- Publishers, 127-140.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Writing." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 5-13.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Writing with Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, 184.
- Fulwiler, Toby. "Writing Back and Forth: Class Letters." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 15-25.
- Godshalk, F.I., et al, *The Measurement of Writing Ability* (NY: 1966).
- Hirsch, E.D. *The Philosophy of Composition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- Murray, Donald M. "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader." *CCC* 33 (May 1982) 140-147.
- Raimondino, C. "A Factorial Analysis of the Evaluation of Scholastic Compositions in the Mother Tongue." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 30 (1959) 242-51.
- Sargent, M Elizabeth. "Peer Response to Low Stakes Writing in a WAC Literature Classroom." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 41-52.
- Scorcinelli, Mary Deane and Peter Elbow, eds. *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing," 33 *CCC* (1982), 148-56.
- White, Edward. "Language and Reality in Writing Assignments," 41 *CCC*, 1990, 187-200.
- Young, Art. "Mentoring, Modeling, Monitoring, Motivating: Response to Students' Ungraded Writing as Academic Conversation," in *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. Mary Deane Scorcinelli and Peter Elbow, eds. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. Number 69, 1997. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 27-40.

---

## Claiming Research: Students as “Citizen-Experts” in WAC-Oriented Composition

*Michelle Sidler, Auburn University*

*“The first thing I want to say to you who are students is that you cannot afford to think of being here to **receive** an education: you will do much better to think of being here to **claim** one.” —Adrienne Rich (1979, p. 231)*

It may seem odd to begin a discussion of academic research by quoting Adrienne Rich’s well-known 1977 speech, “Claiming an Education.” But, if one substitutes “research” for “an education,” the sentiment more or less describes the situation faced by most first-year students assigned research in composition. Completing the monumental academic “Research Paper” in first-year writing courses is considered a rite of passage for students in many universities (including my own, Auburn University), and is one often performed with grim resignation and uncertain purpose by many of those involved (Schwegler & Shamoon, 1982). Such was the case when I began teaching English Composition II, a second-semester, first-year writing course that makes up one of several humanities core courses within Auburn’s curriculum. These core courses, including a two-semester sequence of composition, are mandated by our state articulation agreement, and many curricular guidelines are predetermined by that agreement. Our department has molded this curriculum somewhat, but any innovations must be implemented cautiously and creatively. Drawing on previous WAC research about disciplinary writing as well as classical rhetoric and critical pedagogy, I will describe my response to this mandate, theorizing a new critical space for WAC, one that promotes students’ civic engagement while they are researching an academic discipline. Operating at the nexus of rhetoric, critical theory, and WAC scholarship, I will discuss ways that a critical WAC pedagogy encourages students’ investment in their own research and encourages students to become responsible “citizen-experts” within their communities.

Though the purpose of Auburn’s research paper in English Composition II is to prepare students for academic research, I also strive to include a strong critical component, highlighting moral and ethical concerns within academic discourse much like that described by John Pennington and Robert Boyer (2003), wherein students are conscious of the responsibility they have

to readers, civic communities, and even themselves to produce accurate, reflective, and moral writing. Unlike Pennington and Boyer, who teach at St. Norbert College, a small Catholic school, Auburn is a large secular university without religious ties. But Auburn's curriculum does reflect a strong moral grounding: as a land-grant institution, its mission is to foster students' sense of public accountability, promoting "educated and responsible citizens" (Auburn University, 2005) as well as specialists within academic disciplines. Auburn is not alone in this goal; most land grant institutions conscientiously educate students to be critically informed citizenry of their resident states. Critical WAC pedagogies can play a vital role in the education of an informed citizenry, whether religious or secular, by promoting the examination of academic discourse within public contexts. Moreover, WAC pedagogies can encourage students to "own" their research, to claim personal responsibility by guiding academic discourse through civic involvement.

### **Critical WAC Pedagogies and Citizen-Rhetors**

To enact a critical WAC pedagogy, I have transformed my second-semester composition course into a discipline-specific "writing to learn" community (McLeod and Maimon, 579). In particular, the course focuses on evaluating both the available academic research in one discipline and the current public discourse about that research. Disciplinary discourse is situated in its academic and public contexts, which encourages students to trace the implications of research for their personal, civic, and economic lives. Through this process, students do not necessarily become experts in all aspects of the internal workings of an academic discourse community (such as knowing all of its disciplinary terminology, research methods, and epistemological frameworks), but they do learn the ways in which that academic research moves from the university laboratory or scholarly journal to the everyday lives of citizens.

This critical WAC pedagogy also accommodates students' personal reactions to knowledge acquisition; in the words of Donna LeCourt, a "critical WAC model" recognizes "the multiplicity of voices and discursive positions constructed in contexts other than schools" (1996, p. 400). As LeCourt argues, allowing students to critically examine texts from their own multiple subject positions, from both inside and outside the academy, helps to personalize academic research for students, investing them in the process of knowledge acquisition and fostering their personal commitments to academic discourse (1996, p. 400). Recent composition and education research has recognized both the diversity and the value of students' literate practices (Kress, 2003; Fleckenstein, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), the discourses they bring to the academy from schoolwork, family life, and social relations. In particular, students increasingly bring complex technological, visual, and multimedia literacies to the composition classroom (Selfe and Hawisher, 2004), discourse practices

that can be exploited and enhanced as students mature in their academic and civic subject positions.

LeCourt’s critical WAC model also encourages students’ personal investment in academic research and recognizes students’ multiple voices and critical approaches to the making of disciplinary knowledge and discourse. To this multiplicity, I would add students’ engaged voices as citizens; WAC-oriented composition can help students make connections between academic research, public discourse, and civic involvement. Such a move is necessitated by the increasingly corporatized context of universities: more and more, university research is funded by corporate organizations, and universities themselves are profiting from patents and other research-derived economic benefits. Academic research often has immediate implications for the public lives of citizens, and our students are uniquely situated in these two communities. Moreover, the speed at which many areas of knowledge (particularly those in the sciences) are advancing—resulting from both academic and corporate research—positions students to learn and write about developments which will soon impact their personal and civic lives in profound ways.

Through academic research, students can examine the relationship between academic discourse and the public sphere, critically reflecting on the import of disciplinary knowledge through their positions both as new members of the academy and as informed public citizens. Thus, I approach the “Research Paper” as a hybrid of several contexts and tasks, introducing students to both WAC-oriented writing-to-learn strategies and rhetorically-informed critical heuristics. Such a pedagogy positions students as “citizen-experts” through several types of activities: learning the major conversations of an otherwise unknown area of academic research, commenting on the place of this research in public discourse, and carrying their knowledge to the public sphere. Composition courses present a critical, reflective space for the development of citizen-experts through WAC pedagogies informed by rhetorical theory and history, combining the classical model of the “citizen-rhetor” and the personal-critical subject position described by LeCourt.

The role of citizen-expert has its roots in the classical rhetorical tradition of citizen-rhetor; in ancient Greek and Roman training, rhetorical education was a means by which citizens were prepared for public discourse and deliberation. Isocrates is most noted for this approach to education; he argued that rhetoric is a technical art necessary for participation in public life. Takis Poulakos describes Isocrates’ teaching philosophy as one which linked education and civic duty: “the link between rhetorical education and political life he sought to secure opened a space from within which it would be possible for Athenians to regard educational activities as so many occasions to make themselves proficient in political deliberation, public controversy, and societal debate” (1997, p. 104). For Isocrates, education was preparation for leadership

in the polis, or city-state, as much as for professional employment. Contemporary neo-classical and critical pedagogies over the last few decades have built on this rhetorical tradition, teaching students Aristotelean principles of argument (Corbett, 1990) and encouraging them to examine public politics and popular culture from within the walls of the academy (Berlin, 1996; McComiskey, 1999; Trimbur, 1997).<sup>1</sup> A “critical WAC model” that positions students as “citizen-experts” can build on these pedagogies by integrating classical rhetorical principles, public discourse, and disciplinary research.

Like WAC pedagogies, Isocrates’ educational schema included learning in the disciplines, but not necessarily for the sake of becoming disciplinary scholars. According to Poulakos, he understood the value of learning many disciplines, but not entirely as a preparation for professional specialization. In fact, Isocrates viewed too much specialization (at the expense of a well-rounded education) as a hindrance to one’s cultivation for civic life and culture. A well-rounded education fosters the cognitive skills needed to understand challenging specialized content, but the communicative reflection of interdisciplinary, foundational studies is also imperative (Poulakos, 1997, p. 101). The education of the citizen-rhetor, then, has much in common with WAC-oriented composition: students pursue the content knowledge of academic fields while learning rhetorical strategies for participation in public decision-making about those areas of inquiry. Both approaches to education aim to produce ethical leaders among the citizenry who are skilled in “the process of of discerning and advocating the common welfare” (Poulakos, 1997, p. 105) through cultural cultivation, specialized knowledge, and rhetorical training. While researching and writing about disciplinary discourse, students can engage this content as citizen-experts and, like the citizen-rhetor, can then take this knowledge to the community, “deliberating publicly the good and possible for the polis” (Poulakis, 1997, p. 105).<sup>2</sup>

### **Citizen-Experts and Biotechnology**

Though I believe that my “citizen-expert” approach to WAC-oriented composition could concentrate on many academic disciplines, especially those in the sciences,<sup>3</sup> I chose to focus on the field of biotechnology because of its timeliness and my own research interests in this area.<sup>4</sup> I devised a sequence of two papers that both introduce students to the field and promote their awareness of major ethical, legal, and social implications of this research. Recent advancements in biotechnology make it a timely topic for both science and non-science composition students. Most importantly, increased public and government interest in bioethics has been largely catalyzed by this field, including national debates about the definition of life and humanity. Multiple communities and industries, as well as millions of medical patients, are affected positively by cutting-edge genetic research, but other groups, such as ethi-

cists, religious leaders, some scientists, and even politicians express concerns about advancements which might lead to social and cultural changes similar to that of the early twentieth century eugenics movement. In addition, controversies such as stem cell research have re-opened debates about the beginning and purpose of life, prompting the media to cover biotechnology’s moral and political issues as much as, if not more than, its scientific achievements.

To educate the public about biotechnology’s potentials and perils, the government is encouraging lessons about biotechnology for all public school students; along with some private organizations, the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) supplies myriad educational tools and activities for free on the Web.<sup>5</sup> My class and I begin our discussion using online educational materials, locating the major lines of inquiry, becoming familiar with important terminology, and discussing pertinent moral and ethical issues. The information contained in online materials is intended for high school students, so it is easily accessible and quickly comprehended. Through its educational efforts, the government is promoting a sort of genetic literacy among the populace, a deep knowledge and understanding of the science behind biotechnology, the applications it produces, and the moral and ethical issues it raises (Andrews et. al, 1994; Collins, Green, & Guttmacher, 2003; McInerney, 2002). As literacy educators, WAC writing instructors are poised to contribute unique perspectives to this literacy campaign and educate the first generation of students who will make major medical, legal, and ethical decisions about this science.

Students perform research and reach conclusions about biotechnology through a two-part paper sequence; the first paper is a scientific literature review essay, and the second is an argumentative paper that integrates outside sources. The scientific literature review is based on the literature review sections contained in most scientific articles, wherein authors cite, discuss, and evaluate previous scientific research in their field. Although this paper is based on a highly specialized disciplinary genre, I adapt it for a more generalized writing-to-learn goal: becoming knowledgeable and informed citizens rather than disciplinary experts. With a public, rather than expert, audience in mind, the assignment asks students to review myriad types of sources—not just scientific writing but also sources from a variety of media including popular periodicals, the Web, books, and journals. Starting with science-oriented databases and print texts, they trace the dissemination of discipline-specific knowledge out to more popular media outlets like newspapers and magazines as well as the Web, evaluating the reliability and relevance of myriad sources and gaining critical awareness of both a biotechnological advancement and the public discourse about that advancement.

I encourage students to compare and contrast the information available in mass media sources to those of more academic journals: they show how certain types of information are available in certain contexts, but others are not so easily accessed. This evaluation can include judgments about the types of informational genres available, the accessibility of relevant information, or the lack of current, accurate, or relevant scientific research. Some students make a judgment about future research that needs to happen—but some of them also (or instead) discover gaps in public discourse. Forensic DNA fingerprinting is a particularly poignant example: when researching, students discover that the most substantive information is found in law and other academic journals and is written in complex legal language. Though Auburn students have access to this material through our university library—and have some knowledge of the scientific principles behind DNA in order to negotiate legal, scientific, and philosophical jargon—the general public normally would not have these privileges. After performing required Web research, students discover that few Web sites clearly explain the legalities and procedures behind DNA fingerprinting, an omission that leaves the general public, including those with relatives and friends involved in legal cases, without accessible resources. The students come to understand this situation as a public (not just academic) concern, and feel a sense of responsibility for the dissemination of forensic DNA knowledge. This sense of responsibility is heightened when students consider the plight of many defendants in legal cases who come from lower class backgrounds and often have fewer educational opportunities than themselves.

DNA fingerprinting is not the only area of biotechnological research with major informational gaps. Students often decry the dearth of complete, accurate, and publicly accessible articles about postgenomic medical research that are needed to help families of patients understand the ethics of emerging experimental treatments. Even by making these evaluations, students become invested in their topics, academically as curious researchers, and personally as public citizens and family members. Moreover, the composition students view themselves as at least somewhat knowledgeable about complex and sophisticated scientific advancements, an empowering transformation for first-year college students. They come to understand that with systematic, thoughtful research practices, they can claim most academic topics—not just research them but claim them as topics about which they have distinct knowledge and insight. With the disciplinary knowledge they acquire through research, students come to see themselves as novices within a scientific field, but citizens who have informed opinions from which to argue.

Because of the relatively short time span in which students perform disciplinary research, they often feel overwhelmed by the amount of information learned in a short period of time. I realized early on that with this much background information, students need a heuristic to guide their thinking. Further-

more, departmental guidelines require students to complete a “Problem/Solution” paper as part of English Composition II. With these two considerations in mind, I devised the second half of the two-paper sequence: an argumentative paper that argues two theses, rather than one: the problematic (or unproblematic) elements of the particular advance they have researched and the solution to addressing that advancement. The first half of the paper, then, consists of an ontological argument about the value of a particular biotechnology while the second half argues for a practical approach to that technology (perhaps a policy, a law, or research support).<sup>6</sup> The first half of the paper gives students the opportunity to personalize the topic, considering its worth for themselves, their families, and society. Students ask whether the biotechnological advancement they study is a social “good,” in much the same way Isocrates envisioned the citizen-rhetor, but here, students draw even more on the knowledge they gained from disciplinary research.

Students are surprised to find that often seemingly esoteric scientific research holds implications for their personal lives—and, just as LeCourt observes, this personal involvement leads to critical action. Some have researched genetic treatments for major diseases that affect their grandparents, parents, and other family members; students then share the knowledge at home, becoming “expert-citizens” within their family-communities. Or, they find that public representations of controversial biotechnological applications, such as cloning, are often rooted in false premises. One of the most moving arguments was by a student who had an identical twin sister. She quickly realized that clones are genetically the same as identical twins (except their gestations are separated by time), which prompted her to defend the value of such humans as ontologically similar to her own life. In researching and writing about cloning, she came to a clearer understanding of her own familial relations and developed a deep sense of responsibility to join the debate about cloning. Her response to the research reflected a personal, expressivistic approach to academic research (LeCourt, 1996): for her, cloning became a moral issue as much as, if not more than, an academic topic. Such commitment reflects the same spirit described by Pennington and Boyer as “[s]ituating writing as a moral and civic duty” (2003, p. 98).

A personal connection to the research helps students understand the moral import behind their roles as citizen-experts, but their compositions are efficacious only if they can place this knowledge in a public context. To move students from a more self-reflective writing-to-learn position to one of civic responsibility, I ask students to consider the practical import of their ontological arguments. As such, the second half of their argumentative papers moves from the realm of the personal to a more public audience. I encourage students to consider the practical limitations of influencing biotechnological research and address the needs of a more distant, public audience. Students decide how to

enact change about their biotechnological advancement, weighing their moral and ethical conclusions against the practicalities of society, economics, and law. They draw on the diversity of their research to locate media representations and public policies which depict or regulate their advancements, tempering their sincere but often grand ideas about specific advancements with awareness of the practical limitations of a capitalist-democratic society.

In 2001, for example, two students researched a cutting edge heart disease therapy which utilizes genetic growth factors to stimulate heart vessel growth. At that time, only one doctor, Jeffrey Isner, was experimenting with the therapy, and he had just completed a first set of therapy trials, so these students were able to gather through Auburn's library all the information about this topic which was publicly available, a thoroughness made possible because it was cutting-edge work. In 2001 (and indeed, since then), all indications were that the advancement successfully repaired heart tissue with very few side effects, offering hope to patients in advanced stages of the disease. However, in those early years, few heart patients had access to, or even knowledge of, this procedure, and the students expressed personal regrets that their own deceased family members who suffered from heart disease were not treated with this therapy. Therefore, a great deal of these students' papers entailed policy-based arguments for more funding and publicity. In their role as "citizen-experts," the students acquired an expert level of knowledge about this treatment, placed that knowledge in a personal/public context, and then engaged civic debate through their disciplinary knowledge. As "citizen-experts," they negotiated multiple forms of discourse: writing-to-learn strategies that taught them about the procedure, personal reflections about family members, and formal argumentation that employs language and discourse conventions designed to persuade a public audience. This complexity is a reflection of WAC's discourse "continuum," its capacity for writing-to-learn strategies as well as its accommodation of public discourse (Reiss and Young, 2001, p. 61-63).

### **"Citizen-Experts" and Applied Research**

Although my composition students become "citizen-experts" in a very precise strand of biotechnological research and are able to make critical judgments about the status of research in that sub-area, students do not achieve what Susan MacDonald calls "[e]xpert, insider prose" (1994, p. 147), the highest level on her continuum of disciplinary writing. Brian Sutton (1997) describes MacDonald's continuum, four levels of skill and knowledge that writers may achieve:

1. Nonacademic writing
2. Generalized academic writing concerned with stating claims, offering evidence, respecting others' opinions, and learning how to write with authority

3. Novice approximations of particular disciplinary ways of making knowledge
4. Expert, insider prose (Sutton, 1997, p. 48, cited as MacDonald, 1994, p. 187)

The two-paper sequence I have described here often prompts students to achieve the third level, approximating knowledge-making within a small sub-field of biotechnology, but their conclusions are different from those described by MacDonald. Rather than becoming scholars of disciplinary discourse, students become highly informed consumers of the research within that discipline. In the two-paper sequence, they achieve “novice approximations of particular disciplinary ways of making knowledge,” but those approximations entail a more generalized understanding of the disciplines’ available research as well as a critical understanding about available public knowledge. Reflecting Isocrates’ rhetorical education, students’ research and writing operates in the shared space of the academy and the *polis*, bringing together the discourse practices of each to enact civic change.

Sutton and MacDonald argue that students will not find personal value in academic discourse if they are prompted to produce new forms of writing, like the scientific literature review, before they have time to critically examine the subject and its research. However, the two papers described here work in tandem to give students a sense of responsibility as academic researchers, family members, and informed citizens. While I agree that the reproduction of disciplinary genres (like the scientific literature review) should not be the primary emphasis of any research paper, I argue that exploiting the heuristic capabilities of a disciplinary genre is effective as a writing-to-learn activity. The goal is not to reproduce or even master scientific discourse conventions; it is to use the heuristic qualities of those conventions to enhance students’ understanding of their own research and its implications. Disciplinary conventions like the scientific literature review serve a rhetorical purpose for “insiders,” contextualizing and situating research within a larger discourse community (Bazerman, 2000; Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1991). Students also can contextualize research through such a review, learning not just the status of research, but its place within larger social, economic, personal, and political structures. Seemingly deterministic genres like that of the scientific literature review allow writers a framework within which they can reflect on the process and results of research—leading to informed practice within broad academic and civic contexts, but not necessarily “expert, insider prose.”

As “citizen-experts,” students are not experts among disciplinary professionals; instead they enact this role among the general citizenry, learning highly contextualized discourse in order to work for broad social change. Most importantly, students experience the commitment to learning and the rewards

of discovery which lie at the heart of all academic research. Last summer, I was at a local water park where a former student was working as a lifeguard. While I drifted past her down the artificial river, she asked me: “Dr. Sidler, have you heard about any biotechnology news?” Two years after my course, this student was still engaged with the material, not as a disciplinary insider, but as an informed citizen eager to share knowledge. Several students, in fact, have sent me biotechnological updates they have found, furthering my own research and creating a life-long learning relationship. Examples such as these are prevalent and evidence of students’ sense of personal connection to the topic of biotechnology—their continuing desire to claim their research.

## Notes

1. John Trimbur builds on the work of Jim Berlin to develop a concept of students as “citizen-workers,” a more overt Marxist approach to students’ civic involvement than the “citizen-expert” role presented here.
2. To further locate students’ research and writing in a public context, I plan to expand the two paper sequence by asking students to identify public spaces where in they can enact their roles as “citizen-experts” further. Students will identify activities that utilize their disciplinary knowledge and writing skills to inform and lead the community. These activities might include writing to specific public audiences or constructing informational materials that can be used to educate the public.
3. This “citizen-expert” approach to the research paper can be applied most directly to information technology and nanotechnology, wherein new advances are emerging monthly—if not weekly or daily. Eventually I plan to adapt my course to these other disciplinary fields, serving a broad range of Auburn students.
4. Students contribute to my own research directly: they often inform me about new biotechnological advancements, creating a workshop-type atmosphere for the course. In addition, because the field is changing so quickly, advances often occur during the course of students’ research, and they share this new information with me. This collaboration has become so valuable to my work, I even acknowledged them in the footnotes of a recent article (Sidler, 2004).
5. See for example, the National Human Genome Research Institute (2005), PBS/DNA (Alabama Public Television, 2003), and bioethics.net (2005) Web pages.
6. This idea was inspired by the explanation of an arguable thesis in *The New Century Handbook* (2002), which delineates different types of theses, including “claims of fact, value, or policy” (p. 128).

## References

- Alabama Public Television. (2003). *DNA*. Retrieved February 21, 2005, from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/dna/>.
- Andrews, L. B., J. E. Fullarton, N. A. Holtzman, & Arno G. Motulsky. (1994). *Assessing genetic risks: Implications for health and social policy*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Bazerman, C. (2000). *Shaping written knowledge: The genre and activity of the experimental article in science*. Retrieved April 8, 2005 from WAC Clearing house Landmark Publications in Writing Studies, [http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/books/bazerman\\_shaping/](http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/books/bazerman_shaping/) [Originally published in print by Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin P, 1988.]
- Berkenkotter, C., Huckin, T. N., & J. Ackerman. (1991). Social context and socially constructed text: The initiation of a graduate student into a writing research community. In C. Bazerman & J. Paradis (Eds.), *Textual dynamics of the professions* (pp. 191-215). Madison: U. Wisconsin P. [Reprinted in C. Bazerman & D. R. Russell (Eds.), *Landmark essays on writing across the curriculum*. Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1994 (pp. 211-232).]
- Berlin, J. A. (1996). *Rhetorics, poetics, and cultures: Refiguring college English studies*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Collins, F. S., Green, E. D., & Guttmacher, A. E. (2003). A vision for the future of genomics research: A blueprint for the genomic era. *Nature*, 422, 1-13.
- Corbett, E. P. J. (1990). *Classical rhetoric for the modern student*, (3rd ed.). New York: Oxford U.P.
- Fleckenstein, K. (2003) *Embodied literacies: Imageword and a poetics of teaching*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP.
- Hult, C. A. and T. N. Huckin, eds. (2002). *The new century handbook*, (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Routledge.
- Lankshear, C. & M. Knobel. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Berkshire, UK: Open University P.
- LeCourt, D. (1996). WAC as critical pedagogy: The third stage? *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, 16, 389-405.
- MacDonald, S. P. (1994). *Professional academic writing in the humanities and social sciences*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- McComiskey, B. (1999). *Teaching composition as a social process*. Logan, UT: Utah State P.
- McInerney, J. D. (2002). Education in a genomic world. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 27, 369-390.
- McLeod, S. & E. Maimon. (2000). Clearing the air: WAC myths and realities. *College English*, 62, 573-83.
- National Human Genome Research Institute. (2005). Retrieved February 21, 2005, from <http://www.genome.gov/>.
- Pennington, J. & R. Boyer (2003). A reflective strategy for writing across the curriculum: Situating WAC as a moral and civic duty. *The WAC Journal*, 14, 87-100.
- Poulakos, T. (1997). *Speaking for the polis: Isocrates' rhetorical education*.

Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P.

- Reiss, D. & A. Young. (2001). WAC wired: Electronic communication across the curriculum. In S. H. MacLeod, E. Miraglia, M. Soven, & C. Thaiss (Eds.), *WAC for the new millenium: Strategies for continuing writing-across-the-curriculum programs* (pp.52-85). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Rich, Adrienne. (1995). Claiming an education. *On lies, secrets, and silence: Selected prose 1966-1978* (Reissue Ed.) (pp. 231-236). New York: Norton.
- Schwegler, R. A. & L. K. Shamon. (1982). The aims and process of the research paper. *College English*, 44, 817-824.
- Selfe, C. & G. Hawisher. (2004). *Literate lives in the information age: Narratives on literacy from the United States*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sidler, M. (2004). The not-so-distant-future: Composition studies in the culture of biotechnology. *Computers and Composition*, 21, 129-145.
- St. Louis University Center for Health Care Ethics. (2005). *bioethics.net*. Retrieved February 21, 2005, from <http://www.bioethics.net/>.
- Sutton, B. (1997). Writing in the disciplines, First-year composition, and the research paper." *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* 2, 46-57.
- Trimbur, J. (1997). Berlin's citizen and First World rhetoric. *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, 17, 500-502.

---

## Making the Connection: A “Lived History” Assignment in an Upper-Division German Course

*Lisa Jennings, Valparaiso University*

In her book *Risking Who One Is*, Susan Rubin Suleiman asks, “Why ... write? Why tell the tale?” and reflects further that “although the double bind of ‘having to tell, having to fail’ belongs most excruciatingly to those whose [stories] are the most painful, the most unrepresentable, perhaps it is inherent in all autobiographical writing. No one will ever experience my life as I have, no one will ever fully understand my story. Will I ever fully understand my story?” (212-213). Suleiman relates at the same time the explicit impulse to write her story, brought on by reading autobiographical texts: “Reading other people’s war memories,” she says, “has become indissociable, for me, from the desire (and recently, the act) of writing my own” (199).

Suleiman’s reflections convey the importance of *lived history*—the personal perspective within historical, cultural, political changes and social movements—and provided the impetus for an upper-division course I designed for the spring semester 2003 at the University of Minnesota. Taught in German and intended for students who had taken at least one introductory literature class,<sup>1</sup> the course concept reflected my sense of the inextricable connections between personal and political perspectives involved in narrating one’s experience, connections I hoped to bring out both in the course texts themselves as well as in the students’ writing assignments. Here I will discuss the design of the course and my rationale for the incorporation of a creative non-fiction writing assignment, the outcomes of the project and the challenges I faced in facilitating it, and finally will suggest how foreign language teaching, particularly at the upper levels, could benefit from a reflective engagement with the body of scholarship on college-level writing generated by the nation-wide Writing Across the Curriculum movement.<sup>2</sup>

Titling the course “Life Stories/Lived History,” I chose personal narratives that covered the post-1945 period in German-speaking countries. Ranging from a Nobel Prize winner’s autobiography to a controversial work of undercover journalism, from interviews exploring women’s lives in East Germany to a memoir of an Afro-German activist from the west, the course texts confronted us with powerful stories of individual lives.<sup>3</sup> As we explored the clearly personal dimension and the wider social significance of each text, I

asked the students to consider what new perspectives emerged that may have been marginalized by dominant historical narratives. Acknowledging the fine line between the desire to voice a personal perspective on history and the challenges imbedded in adopting the narrative first-person, we worked on developing something of the postmodern sophistication necessary to consider how an “authentic” voice is constructed for the reader, how memory can be unreliable, identity fragmentary and unstable, and how the past may ultimately be, as Suleiman suggests, “unrepresentable.” In light of such potential obstacles to narrating one’s experience, a significant insight emerged from a character in one of the course texts who claims that the reason we write our stories is that narrating changes us (Kerschbaumer 36). The act of telling one’s story is inherently a dynamic one, transforming both the narrator and the narration of a culture.

In planning this course, it struck me that an obvious implication from the texts I had selected would be to encourage students to engage not only critically but also creatively with the course material, to make the connection of writing about their personal perspective within their own culture. As I considered how to incorporate such an assignment, a cursory search of college-level curricula and discussions with colleagues supported my perception that creative writing has not been an integral part of upper-division foreign language education, at least not in the field of German Studies.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the current scholarly focus in foreign language pedagogy on the role of third-year bridge courses—which provide a transition from language-based instruction towards the content-based culture and literature courses of the upper-division—has eclipsed the need for reflection on the development of mature writing in the target language. Cheryl Krueger, however, has recently assessed the drawbacks of “overpersonalization” in lower-level language courses and its counterpart, “underpersonalization” in upper-level courses. Incorporating more imaginative personalization exercises, Krueger suggests, will heighten students’ awareness of the differences between their “personal and scholarly narrative voices,” and will help to avoid what she poignantly calls a “solemn shedding of personal connection to the course content” (22) in upper-division courses.

The “Life Stories/Lived History” course I was designing offered a compelling opportunity to link analytic scholarship with personal reflection. So in addition to a textual analysis paper earlier in the semester, the linchpin assignment of the course asked students to write an essay on their own “lived history.” Switching from discussions on issues posed by postwar German-speaking authors to writing knowledgeably about their own position within American culture, I admit, may seem to be a counterintuitive curricular direction within the German literature classroom. As theoretical validation for this move, I propose the critical work of Claire Kramsch, who has argued convincingly that

foreign language education could benefit from acknowledging “each language user’s unique place in history” (“Language” 10). In her attempts to de-mythologize the monolithic native-speaker construct as the ideal against which to measure student progress, Kramersch questions why non-native speakers should “disregard their unique multilingual perspective on the foreign language and on its literature and culture to emulate the idealized monolingual native speaker” (“Privilege” 251-252). Although the response to the native vs. non-native speaker model has been somewhat contentious,<sup>5</sup> I will suggest that the challenges imbedded in Kramersch’s scholarship lie perhaps more immediately in her focus on the distinctive, socially situated voice of the language user and in the opportunities we offer our students for creative self-expression in the target language.

Theoretical implications aside, I tried to anticipate the practical issues my students would face by dividing the “lived history” assignment into five stages over approximately five weeks. Early on, I asked students to consider possible topics by writing short descriptions of issues they identified as important to them and which, they could argue, also clearly had wider significance in our society. Students displayed an interest in writing about the war in Iraq, abortion, unemployment, vegetarianism, feminism, and religion. The second stage of the assignment asked students to write about how a specific experience shaped their perspective on the issue they had chosen in a personal and unique way. Here students explored their family histories, including a parent’s struggle with job loss due to corporate downsizing, a sister’s journey toward the Baha’i faith, and a father’s Vietnam combat experience. Others focused on their own experiences with overcoming anti-Americanism in Germany, questioning anti-German sentiments in the U.S., or dealing with frustration at being a minority in engineering courses.

In the third stage of the assignment—the first draft—I wanted to encourage students to go beyond a straightforward, experiential style in narrating their experience towards an ultimately more expressive and persuasive tone in the target language. Here the course texts served as models: throughout the semester, we engaged in attentive analyses of the craft of writing and how the various authors awakened our interest: for example, using a key moment to set the tone, sequencing the text through flashbacks, creating a sense of intimacy by infusing the text with detail, or tantalizing the reader through a conscious use of ambiguity. In short, I encouraged the students to explore stylistically creative narrative strategies to relate their experience and ideas. During a workshop day devoted to peer review, students exchanged rough drafts of their essays and filled out a page with commentary, responding in particular to the narrative strategies they could identify in their partner’s paper, and finally discussing their comments and suggestions with each other.<sup>6</sup>

Although the students’ prose naturally did not approach the sophistica-

tion of the German-speaking authors we had read, I was impressed with the range of narrative strategies they employed to create lively and energetic renditions of their experiences. One student had read a newspaper article about a Tennessee high school that had decided to call off a planned student exchange to Germany in the spring of 2003. Outraged, the student penned a letter to the principal and followed up with a phone call in order to express her strong commitment to the concept of international exchange. The paper for my course was written in diary form, relaying her reflections as she dropped off the letter and waited for a response. The phone call was transcribed as well, interspersed with italics indicating her thoughts as the principal spoke. Other students also used multi-genred montage forms, including personal narrative combined with poetry in the essay on religion, and memories of family scenes interspersed with recalled nightmares in the essay on vegetarianism. Two students peppered their personal stories with media slogans, one to demonstrate the unreflective nature of American public opinion on the Iraq war, the other to show the double-speak of the corporate world amidst wage freezes and downsizing. Another student discarded the memoir tone entirely and wrote a short story that used color in clothing as a metaphor while exploring his realizations about nationalisms, society, and the possibilities for international understanding.

I will return to the issue of responding to the final stages of the assignment—the second and final drafts—below. First, however, in assessing the overall outcome of the assignment, I can say that these essays were easily the most intriguing and compelling student papers I have read to date. I was pleased with their spirited engagement with issues and the array of creative experimentation. On a written curriculum evaluation the students' assessment of the creative assignment (in contrast to the analytical essay in the first half of the semester) was comparatively effusive. One student wrote, "Yeah! Very rare in upper level courses. Nice to see. Also important. Made us think about writing styles that we've read, and consider or actually try using them." Another wrote, "*Such* a nice change, a really good idea, made me pay attention to style." And yet another: "I thought this was the most beneficial aspect of this course. Need more German classes that allow you to be creative." Even students who expressed some level of difficulty with the assignment responded positively to the idea: "It was hard writing about personal issues, but I thought the assignment was good and I liked being creative in the style of writing." Another wrote, "A big challenge, but I am enjoying it immensely." And finally, one student commented that the assignment was "a little scary to do also—scary is good." Reading their evaluations, I was struck with how enthusiastic they were about the creative nature of the assignment and with their unsolicited affirmation that this was a rather rare experience.

As sure as I am that this assignment was pedagogically sound and worth repeating, I also faced some thorny challenges in facilitating it, and not every-

thing worked as well as I had hoped. Specifically, I found it difficult to grade this assignment, in part because it seemed almost contradictory to assign a letter grade to these highly personal papers. At the same time, I wanted to react meaningfully to their writing. The last two stages of the assignment involved my responses to their second and final drafts. In the assignment handout, I had stipulated that one-third of the grade would be for the warm-up stages (including the peer-reviewed first draft), one-third for the second draft, one-third for the final draft. I clarified that in grading their second and final drafts, I would consider grammar, as well as creative style and the personal dimension of the topic. As I look back on it now I can see how subconsciously vague these terms are; my own uncertainty about the grading process produced a set of difficult to define rubrics. Although no student asked me to clarify exactly what I meant by "creative style," in retrospect I would have been hard-pressed to articulate ahead of time what would have constituted "enough" creativity to do well on the assignment. In the end I decided it was sufficient if students employed an identifiable narrative strategy that contributed meaningfully to the theme of the essay. All students fulfilled this criterion satisfactorily; some were clearly more skilled than others. Nearly all students needed encouragement to develop more expressively the personal dimension of their topic. Both the second and final drafts were assessed with a composite grade, rather than with separate marks for grammar, creativity, and the personal dimension. My response to the second draft consisted of extensive written comments including questions and suggestions coupled with a copy of the essay marked for structural accuracy. Marking texts with correction symbols is a widely used practice in the foreign language context, one which is often implemented already in the beginning stages of language learning.<sup>7</sup> In this course, however, my written response seemed to be counteracted by the accompanying error markings. In general, I saw very little revision between drafts. Some students made minor additive clarifications to their final drafts; most concentrated on correcting the line-by-line grammar markings in their essays, a process that clearly impeded their ability to consider meaningful revisions to the essay as a whole.<sup>8</sup> After grading the final drafts, I struggled with how I might have restructured the assignment in order to improve the students' structural accuracy in German (which is generally still a concern at the upper-division level) while also creating an atmosphere that would encourage revision of a more comprehensive nature.

Let me suggest that second language teaching at the upper levels could benefit from a wealth of scholarship on college-level writing in English that has been grappling with similar issues for some time. Since teaching the "Life Stories/Lived History" course, I have had the opportunity to teach in a freshman seminar program, an experience that quickly initiated me into strategies common to freshman writing programs but little discussed in second-language research. Upper-division language classrooms, for example, could easily ex-

pand in-class partner review to writing groups of three or four students for which the written peer reviews are completed as homework, allowing each writer to receive a broader range of comments and allowing more time in class for a discussion of each paper. Upper-division courses could consider adopting the portfolio approach, redirecting the sentence-level accuracy model, so important initially in language study, to emphasize rather the development of mature writing only achievable through a focus on revision. If we agree that revision—a major re-working of ideas beyond structural issues—will result in more polished writing, it certainly seems worth experimenting with one of the main features of the portfolio approach: not assigning grades until the final draft. Nedra Reynolds, among others, persuasively advocates for postponed grading when it is coupled with the instructor’s ongoing and rigorous assessment of student writing throughout the semester (31).

In response to the issue of students “feeling unclear about ‘where they stand’ ... without having a series of graded drafts” (158), Edwina Helton and Jeff Sommers suggest an alternative approach: “describ[ing] student writing in terms of its stage in the process of becoming a completed portfolio draft” by identifying the writing as an Early, Middle, or Late draft (158). Such rhetorical markers, Helton and Sommers argue, reorient the students’ focus on imagining their work along a path towards more substantial, more polished writing instead of viewing their text as qualitatively graded and thus branded as “good” or “bad” (159). Their approach seems especially useful in articulating an academically meaningful response aimed at encouraging students to develop the complexity and maturity of their writing.

My experience revealed that upper-level German students craved writing assignments that offered a creative release. Their energetic response seemed fueled by a sense of connection to their writing: the assignment had become *their* text. The challenges I encountered in responding to their writing at this level, however, are generally unexplored in second-language scholarship. Fortunately, we do not have to look too far afield to find insightful discussions on student writing at the college level. Foreign language practitioners would clearly benefit from an exploration of this body of WAC research and experience; correspondingly, it is certainly time for us to join this conversation and reflect on how we can contribute to it.

## Notes

1. In addition, most students in the small class of eight had spent time abroad. The course was cross-listed with Global Studies as part of the Foreign Language Immersion Program (FLIP). FLIP students engage in an “immersion” semester at the University of Minnesota, taking all of their courses in the target language.
2. Regrettably, the foreign language contribution to WAC scholarship has been

minimal. See Estes, et. al. for a thoughtful discussion of writing assignments in German, Spanish, and French classrooms. See also Gerd Bräuer’s *Writing Across Languages* from his series *Advances in Foreign and Second Language Pedagogy*, which serves as a compelling example of scholarship aimed at increasing scholarly collaboration and exchange between ESL and foreign language studies.

3. A list of course texts appears in the Appendix.
4. One notable exception is a creative writing course offered by Allegheny College (see [http://webpub.allegheny.edu/dept/german/ger\\_writers.html](http://webpub.allegheny.edu/dept/german/ger_writers.html)), taught annually by a German-speaking writer-in-residence. Currently I am teaching a creative writing course for upper-level German students at Valparaiso University. The relative scarcity of courses specifically focused on creative writing does not necessarily imply that writing assignments of a creative nature in literature or culture classrooms are lacking as well, although typically, formal writing assignments in upper-division German courses focus on text analysis or research.
5. See, for example, the responses published alongside Kramersch’s “The Privilege of the Non-Native Speaker” in Carl S. Blyth’s edited volume, *The Sociolinguistics of Foreign-Language Classrooms: Contributions of the Native, the Nearnative, and the Non-native Speaker*. Koike and Liskin-Gasparro focus on the loss of a pedagogical model; Siskin offers a reevaluation of the motivational effect of the native-speaker ideal.
6. I found this exercise particularly useful. Students took each other’s work seriously and were quite animated while explaining their comments. They appeared to be sensitive to each other’s strengths and weaknesses, pointing out what was effective and compelling, followed by direct, but constructive criticism. I overheard comments (in German) such as, “I like this episode, but it could be better. I don’t know what you’re feeling here.” In their written commentary (also in German), one student wrote, “I’d like to know more about how you were changed by this experience.” Another wrote, “Your text reads a little cold and distanced because there are no feelings—is that your strategy? That we’ve become cold because of these events?”
7. At the beginning stages of language learning, students are obviously not expected to have full control over structures. Instructors often follow a set pattern of increasing difficulty when marking student texts, beginning perhaps with subject-verb agreement, and gradually adding word order, tense, case, adjective endings, and so on. Typically texts are marked with symbols that indicate the type of error rather than with the correction itself.
8. A tactical mistake more easily remedied also contributed to the lack of revision: I had failed to specify a page length for the initial draft at the peer review stage and was thus disappointed that several students came to class with only a page or two of a five-page assignment.

## Works Cited

- Blyth, Carl S., ed. *The Sociolinguistics of Foreign-Language Classrooms: Contributions of the Native, the Near-native, and the Non-native Speaker*. AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction. Ser. ed. Sally Sieloff Magnan. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2003.
- Bräuer, Gerd, ed. *Writing Across Languages*. Advances in Foreign and Second Language Pedagogy. Stamford, CT: Ablex, 2000.
- Estes, Gisela B., Barbara Lopez-Mayhew, and Marie-Therese Gardner. "Writing in the Foreign Languages Department." *The Plymouth State College Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum* 9 (Aug. 1998): 68-81.
- Helton, Edwina L. and Jeff Sommers. "Repositioning Revision: A Rhetorical Approach to Grading." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 28.2 (Dec. 2000): 157-164.
- Kerschbaumer, Marie-Thérèse. *Der weibliche Name des Widerstands: Sieben Berichte*. Olten: Walter, 1980.
- Koike, Dale A. and Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro. "The Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker Meets the Practical Needs of the Language Teacher." *Blyth* 263-266.
- Kramsch, Claire. "Language and Culture: A Social Semiotic Perspective." *ADFL Bulletin* 33.2 (2002): 8-15.
- . "The Privilege of the Non-Native Speaker." *Blyth* 251-262.
- Krueger, Cheryl. "Form, Content, and Critical Distance: The Role of 'Creative Personalization' in Language and Content Courses." *Foreign Language Annals* 34.1 (2001): 18-25.
- Reynolds, Nedra. *Portfolio Teaching: A Guide for Instructors*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.
- Siskin, H. Jay. "The Native Speaker: Membership Has its Privileges." *Blyth* 277-280.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994.

## Appendix: Course Texts for "Life Stories/Lived History: Personal Accounts of Social Change in Postwar German-Speaking Countries"

### *Theoretical Introduction:*

- Klüger, Ruth. *Dichter und Historiker: Fakten und Fiktionen*. Wiener Vorlesungen im Rathaus 73. Ed. Hubert Christian Ehalt. Wien: Picus, 2000. 35-52.
- Kosta, Barbara. "Introduction: Autobiography Reconsidered." Introduction. *Recasting Autobiography: Women's Counterfictions in Contemporary German Literature and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. 1-31.

### *Primary Texts and Films and Secondary Texts:*

- Andreas-Friedrich, Ruth. *Der Schattenmann: Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1938-1945*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1947. [excerpts]
- Biermann, Wolf. "Zwei Portraits." Foreword. *Gedächtnisprotokolle*. By Jürgen Fuchs. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977. 7-10.
- Canetti, Elias. *Die gerettete Zunge*. 1977. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1979.

- Fuchs, Jürgen. *Gedächtnisprotokolle*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977. [excerpts]
- Herzog, Werner. *Schwingen der Hoffnung [Julianes Sturz in den Dschungel]*. Werner-Herzog-Film, 1999.
- Hügel-Marshall, Ika. *Daheim unterwegs: Ein deutsches Leben*. 1998. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2001.
- Ich wollte immer blond sein auf der Haut*. Dir. James Pusack. Joint PICS/ZDF production. 1995.
- Kerschbaumer, Marie-Thérèse. "Helene und Elise." *Der weibliche Name des Widerstands: Sieben Berichte*. Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter-Verlag, 1980. 21-50.
- Lange, Sigrid. "Dokument und Fiktion: Marie-Thérèse Kerschbaumers *Der weibliche Name des Widerstands*." *Women in German Yearbook 10* (1994): 203-217.
- Özakin, Aysel. "Ali hinter den Spiegeln." *Literatur Konkret* (1986): 6-9.
- Özdamar, Emine Sevgi. "Mutter Zunge." *Mutterzunge: Erzählungen*. 1990. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1998. 9-14.
- Runge, Erika. "Putzfrau Maria B." *Bottroper Protokolle*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968. 74-91.
- . "Überlegungen beim Abschied von der Dokumentarliteratur." *Tintenfisch Jahrbuch der deutschen Literatur 11* (1977): 91-97.
- Sander, Helke. *Der subjektive Faktor*. Basis-Film, 1980.
- Struck, Karin. *Klassenliebe*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973. [excerpts]
- Wallraff, Günter. *Ganz unten*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1985. [excerpts]
- Walser, Martin. "Berichte aus der Klassengesellschaft." Foreword. *Bottroper Protokolle*. By Erika Runge. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968. 7-10.
- Wander, Maxie. *Guten Morgen, du Schöne: Protokolle nach Tonband*. 1978. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993. [excerpts]
- Wolf, Christa. "Berührung: Ein Vorwort." Foreword. *Guten Morgen, du Schöne: Protokolle nach Tonband*. By Maxie Wander. 1978. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993. 11-22.

## The Tallest WAC Expert in North America: An Interview with Bill Condon

by Carol Rutz, Carleton College

At six feet, six inches, Bill Condon literally towers over his WAC colleagues—as well as almost everyone else. Easily spotted at crowded conference sessions, hotel lobbies, and on the sidewalks of Washington State University, where he is Director of Campus Writing Programs, Bill Condon lends a presence to writing pedagogy and assessment that is truly out-sized. His influence is in proportion to his personal dimensions; few WAC directors have the range of experience and interests that Bill brings to his work at his campus, as a consultant, and as a workshop leader and training facilitator for faculty interested in methods associated with WAC, assessment, critical thinking, and new media.

Among Bill's current projects is co-editorship with Liz Hamp-Lyons of the journal *Assessing Writing*, an international journal that appears quarterly. He and Hamp-Lyons also collaborated on a 2000 volume, *Assessing the Portfolio*, published by Hampton Press, a scholarly book that introduces the theoretical and practical foundations of portfolio assessment within courses, majors, programs, and curricula. With Wayne Butler, Bill co-authored a landmark textbook aimed at helping students navigate electronic media, *Writing the Information Superhighway* (Allyn & Bacon, 1997). His work at Washington State University on writing program design, curriculum, and assessment is well known; two chapters written with multiple co-authors in *Beyond Outcomes*, edited by Richard Haswell (Ablex 2001), address the fascinating research that is emerging from the WSU program.

For the past five years, Bill has overseen Washington State's Critical Thinking Project. With grant support from Washington's Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), Bill and his colleagues have designed the *WSU Guide to Rating Critical Thinking*, the only tool capable of measuring critical thinking in student learning outcomes—and according to FIPSE, the only tool that has ever been able to show growth in critical thinking. The project helps faculty across the disciplines integrate critical thinking into their course materials and assignments, and it provides feedback on how well those materials and assignments are working, based on students' success in thinking critically in their responses. A wealth of information about this project is available at <http://>

---

wsuctproject.wsu.edu; Bill and colleague Diane Kelly-Riley have co-authored “Assessing and Teaching What We Value: The Relationship Between College-Level Writing and Critical Thinking Abilities,” *Assessing Writing*, 9.1 (2004), 56-75, on the relationships among WAC, writing assessment and critical thinking.

These publications, among others, reflect Bill’s collaborative and exploratory attitude toward writing pedagogy and assessment. Never satisfied for long with the status quo, Bill seeks to test and extend the possibilities for communication in the academy, the workplace, and in civic life. As a result, Bill is a highly valued speaker and workshop leader who can comfortably engage any audience while cheerfully challenging current practices and leading the way toward extended horizons. Bill is the kind of teacher who sees more in his students and colleagues than they see in themselves. His encouragement and expectations are nearly always realized, thanks to his supportive vision and positive engagement in collaboration.

At the recent convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Francisco, I talked with Bill about his career thus far. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.

CR: *You are the third person I have interviewed for WAC Journal’s series on noteworthy figures in WAC. Like John Bean and Chris Anson, your training was in literary studies—in your case, Victorian literature. And like the other two, your current professional life is based in non-literary pursuits. Your reputation rests on your work in WAC, WID, assessment, and new media. What happened?*

BC: To be honest, as a graduate student, I always thought I would do both lit and comp. At Miami U (my MA institution) and at Brown (where I earned my doctorate), I encountered mentors such as Bill Gracie, Max Moremberg, Don Daiker, and A.D. Van Nostrand, who made sure I kept both emphases going. It was the age of generalists in many ways, and I was motivated to be broadly prepared. Actually, I thought about doing a rhetoric-based dissertation, a theoretical investigation of whether reading and writing are two sides of the same coin—a topic of much speculation in the late 1970s—but that project would have required more coursework and taken longer to complete. My wife and I had a baby daughter, and finishing in a timely way was important for us as a family.

I was fortunate to work with George Landau, a real pioneer in the World Wide Web, intermedia, and more. George was just beginning his interest in technology back then, but through the 1980s he spawned a corps of graduate students who have gone on to do work that links computers with literature and writing. For me, preparation as a generalist meant attention to

media as well as content, theory, and practice.

Specialization came much later. At Arkansas Tech, I taught 19th-century British literature, but everyone in the department also taught composition. My repertoire narrowed in some ways when I joined the University of Michigan's English Composition Board (ECB), a free-standing, university-wide program that turned out to be a great opportunity for me. I initially went there in transition mode, having earned promotion and tenure at Arkansas Tech, but hoping for better career possibilities. I expected to be with the ECB for one three-year term as I sought another tenure-track or tenured job. Instead, I stayed nine years, became the director of the program, and charted a new direction for my career that emphasized computers, assessment, and WAC. Along the way, I was fortunate to work with some truly wonderful and successful people: Emily Lardner, Susanmarie Harrington, Helen Fox, Wayne Butler, Barbara Monroe, Becky Rickly, Jay Robinson, Mark McPhail, and too many others to list. As Associate Director for Instruction, I had a window into these folks' amazing teaching practices; as Director, I was able to participate in their projects. What a learning experience being "in charge" of these colleagues was!

*CR: You have taught and served as an administrator in institutions large and small in many geographical regions. In terms of WAC, how do institutions differ, in your experience? Are there common issues or themes?*

*BC:* The same issues bubble up differently—not based on location, but more on institutional culture. For example, at Arkansas Tech, the culture was that everybody on the tenure track teaches comp. No debate, no question. At Michigan, it was hard to be a writing program administrator (WPA), because the university didn't want to think it needed a writing program. Writing and writing faculty were marginalized, and the program was treated as temporary, as something that the university would outgrow over time. Viewed from that perspective, I now understand that the ECB's growth toward strength and national prominence was a recipe for competition for university resources and eventual abolition. The permanent faculty saw a bunch of lecturers in charge of a university-wide program—setting the agenda on an important aspect of the curriculum—and they didn't want the curriculum to be in the hands of temporary employees. The ECB was too visible and influential for a culture that valued senior faculty. Ultimately, the ECB was replaced with the Sweetland Writing Center, something I proposed and worked on over the years, which better fit the institution's sense of its own needs.

At Washington State, we are a land grant university that became Research I fairly recently—recently enough that many remember their days as a Research II university. The teaching mission is critically important, and writ-

ing is central to the curriculum. The university is not ashamed of the writing program, it's proud of it! Thanks to the great work of Rich Haswell, Susan Wyche, Sue McLeod, Robin Magnusson, Richard Law and others, I was able to take a newly developed position designed to unify programs that were already exciting, successful, and owned by faculty. Nevertheless, my guess is that if the program had relied exclusively on adjuncts, people at WSU might have been as nervous as those at Michigan; a long-term commitment from faculty is far more desirable than dependence on contingent labor—no matter how terrific those folks might be. In any institutional culture, it's important to know how teaching is valued and who controls the curriculum.

CR: *What trends or movements in WAC concern or encourage you at present? Where does assessment fit into WAC?*

BC: Big changes are coming for WAC as more institutions become fully engaged in outcomes-based assessment. Historically, WAC has largely served its own agenda. Now we see prominent programs—such as the wonderful program at George Mason University run by Chris Thaiss and Terry Zawacki—embrace assessment, faculty development, curricular development, and research. The same kind of thing is going on at WSU, resulting in faculty investment in the program's success. Look at the University of Missouri, where a huge cross-disciplinary program supported by a strong WAC Advisory Committee has been a tremendous influence. We're going to see more of this as programs continue to develop. Leading WAC programs are already serving more and broader agendas than writing. Another example is Chris Anson's program at NC State, a program that fosters writing and speaking across the curriculum.

At WSU, assessment drives faculty investment through our junior portfolio. We have multiple faculty in every department and program on campus signing off on student work for the portfolio, and over 25% of our faculty are trained portfolio readers. The whole system works toward active participation in both WAC and assessment. Consequently, WSU, like other schools that combine WAC and assessment, presents a coherent program that can respond to a department's needs to assess outcomes. In fact, the assessment itself is a ready-made set of outcomes that lends itself to longitudinal study. The book Rich Haswell edited, *Beyond Outcomes*, details the WSU assessment story. To my knowledge, it's the only book devoted to the writing programs at a single institution, and the reason for the exception is that WSU's programs were designed to serve an unusually broad set of institutional agendas, ranging from course and curriculum development to accreditation and accountability. Haswell, et al., took up a cause that was important to all the faculty—the ability of our students (and graduates) to write well—so naturally faculty invest in the programs. In a similar way, our Critical Thinking Project has succeeded by

taking up a value that faculty hold and want to promote and working with them to foster it in their students, in their courses, in their disciplines. Successful WAC programs will incorporate the larger competencies that are expressible in writing and that faculty value.

As far as my concerns about WAC directions for the future, I still see a pattern of waxing and waning on some campuses. Nationally, as Sue McLeod discovered in the late 1980s and confirmed a decade or so later, more than half of the WAC programs die when the person with the original vision leaves the program or the campus for whatever reason. We need to find ways to avoid a collapse after the departure of a personality whose energy somehow catalyzed the whole system. At WSU, we successfully dodged that bullet when a Writing Program Administrators' Consultant-Evaluator team suggested unification of our programs. The institution showed admirable vision in response to that advice, creating my position, which was a potentially risky senior hire. That investment in WAC would not have happened without the strong infusion established by my predecessors that affected not just curriculum, but institutional identity and culture.

*CR: As you work with graduate students and mentor new faculty, what do you learn about their experience of WAC, and how do you advise them?*

BC: People who administer and who teach in WAC programs need to learn to see over the walls of their disciplinary training. A WPA can't stay a rhetoric/composition specialist and do WAC. However, a WPA can use that grounding in rhetoric and composition and appreciate the variety of communicative activities among disciplines. WAC faculty in general have to communicate with students who are involved in many different courses and disciplines, respecting the challenges tossed at them.

I had a personal epiphany not long ago when I was assigned a course in British literature for the first time in many years. As a classroom teacher, I realized that my role was that of a WAC faculty member, not merely a teacher of literature. In that context, before those students, I had to take my own advice about how to use writing effectively to advance learning and improve my own teaching. I'd naturally taken that approach in teaching World Civilizations, a first-year course that demands a writing-to-learn pedagogy—but somehow coming to that realization in the process of planning a literature course brought the realization home. That experience reminded me that WAC directors and other WPAs need to seek out and maintain “street cred” to be effective with colleagues and students.

*CR: Through your workshops and graduate courses, you teach faculty and future faculty the benefits of using new media. How do you foresee WAC and*

*new media intersecting? Should we be thinking more broadly about Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC)?*

BC: I think about the future of WAC or CAC on two levels. First, the dominance of new—and old—media is inevitable and unavoidable. Students come to college with skills that were scarce or unknown as recently as ten years ago. Now they are incredibly savvy about computers, and they rely on them for entertainment, communication, access to information, and much more. As faculty, we have to honor our students' skills and be ready to put those skills to work in the service of our academic agendas. At the same time, our students are both much more adept at navigating visual media and much less savvy about interpreting its content. So our jobs teaching critical thinking, analysis, and interpretation are safe.

That reality leads to the second level: faculty development. How do we make the best use of what is available to us on our individual campuses? If we want to promote inquiry-based, student-centered, problem-posing, problem-solving learning in the context of media new to us, that's a big nut to crack. Faculty cannot afford to ignore the difference between the learning apparatus available to current students and the older technologies that supported their own undergraduate and graduate experiences. Fortunately, I see a positive, responsive attitude among many faculty that is innovative and open to newer pedagogies and fresh ideas about teaching and learning. I suppose the lynchpin of my own faculty development efforts has been the knowledge that all of us want our students to do well. If we grant that among ourselves, then we can work together to discover how to boost learning.

I've used computers in my own teaching since 1984. Over the past twenty years, I have seen a change among faculty at institutions of all kinds. In my earliest workshops, I spent time helping faculty learn how to turn the computers on and convincing faculty that they weren't going to break the things. A decade later, when putting your course online meant getting your syllabus on the Web and learning how to upload your Powerpoints so that students could access them after a lecture, I had to help move faculty to use the technologies to engage students in active learning, in what Randy Bass calls distributive learning. Today, though, I see a strong majority of WAC faculty teaching in a hybrid mode that combines classroom and online features in one way or another. As they gain experience with various ways to do hybrid teaching, successes build toward a new status quo that has clearly moved away from teaching methods that dominated in years past. A concomitant increase in institutional resources for technology infrastructure and staff has made the shift more comfortable for everyone. Faculty with a sense of methodological adventure are using media well, thanks to improved support from IT programs and exciting, impressive response from students.

If anything, electronic media advance the goals of inquiry-based, problem-oriented pedagogy, helping students master research and rhetorical strategies that will be useful to them as workers and citizens. The use of electronic media places students closer to the research processes in their fields, allowing them access to the people doing research before it appears in print. This level of engagement, of ongoing knowledge-making, has never before been possible to this degree. Why would they—or we—turn back?

Given the ongoing successes connected to electronic media and related pedagogical innovations, we need to make sure that our programming for faculty keeps pace with the sophistication students bring with them to our courses. To stretch their intellectual and media-savvy muscles, we have an obligation to get in shape and stay in shape ourselves. I think we'll do well to embrace electronic portfolios as our "zone of proximal development" (in the spirit of Vygotsky), since portfolios are something we know about—our familiar ground; therefore, electronic portfolios allow us to work in a familiar environment while extending ourselves in learning how to assign and evaluate new kinds of text. You know, years ago, I gave a talk in which I made a pun about "human textuality." Turned out it was an inside joke—only the insiders in computers and writing got it. At that point, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, text was still regarded as words on paper. Today, no one would disagree that a film is a text, that a Web site is a text, that e-mail is text, that a mediated space is a text—or, maybe, that the definition of text has broadened to the point that a person can be a text that others have to read. Maybe now that pun would work.

Anyway, since I first began working with computers—taking advantage of word processing to promote revision in first-year composition classes—I've felt that computers were an ally in promoting our construct of writing as recursive, as a process, as social, and so on. As word processors gave way to networked electronic learning environments like the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment and similar kinds of Web-based software, that feeling has grown. Now, with electronic portfolios, we have a tool that can help us make common cause with our colleagues across our campuses in promoting learning outcomes that matter to all of us. Once upon a time WAC pioneers like Barbara Walvoord, Art Young, Toby Fulwiler, Dan Fader, and Jay Robinson were missionaries, promoting something they felt all faculty should value. Now, WSU's Teaching Academy—a blue-ribbon task force comprising stellar teachers from every discipline—has formulated six learning outcomes that they propose all students should exhibit: Critical and Creative Thinking, Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning, Information Literacy, Communication (meaning writing, speaking, and listening), Self in Society, and Specialty (that is, depth and breadth in a major). Obviously, WAC plays a strong role in all these outcomes, and the only practical way I can see for students to exhibit them and for faculty

to assess them is via an electronic portfolio. Again, the technology arrives to enable what we want to do, almost at the moment we start wanting to do it. E-portfolios are bound to play a prominent role in WAC—and, coincidentally, e-portfolios bring together the various strands of my own career.

# **Dangerous Partnerships: How Competence Testing Can Sabotage WAC**

*Doug Brent, University of Calgary*

Ensuring that students graduate from post-secondary institutions with good writing skills presents two related challenges: assessment of writing and the teaching of writing. In this essay I want to address a commonly-used solution to these twin challenges: the administration of an institution-wide competence test to place students in WAC courses.

I will begin with some of the reasons that this combination of a writing competence test and mandatory WAC courses is an attractive, and therefore commonly used, solution to this challenge of both certifying writing skills and educating those who do not earn certification. In the remainder of the essay, however, I will use a case study of the University of Calgary, and to a lesser extent Laurentian University, to illustrate some serious dangers of this relationship. I don't want to suggest that competence testing and WAC can never exist in harmony. Like all WAC stories, the stories of the University of Calgary and of Laurentian are enmeshed in local politics that could well be different elsewhere. There may be ways to avoid the pitfalls I describe. But I will be quite candid: my experience has led me to become soured on the idea of combining institution-wide competence testing and WAC. I believe that their seemingly complementary approaches to what appears to be the same problem mask some deeply divided pedagogical assumptions that threaten to undermine the benefits of a WAC program, leading me finally to advise those who would contemplate such a potentially Faustian bargain to use extreme caution or avoid it altogether.

I will end with a brief look at an alternative way of gaining traction on the difficult problem of ensuring students graduate with adequate writing proficiency—first year seminars. In first-year seminars students learn and practice academic writing in a content-specific environment, and instructors are less apt to feel burdened by low-performing writers than in a course that links instruction to universal testing.

## **Why Combining Testing and WAC Looks Attractive**

Let us set to one side for a moment all the pedagogical and theoretical arguments for and against institution-wide writing competence testing (though I will come back to these arguments briefly later in this essay), and assume for

---

a moment that an institution, for whatever combination of political and pedagogical reasons, has decided that it should test writing competence. The significant question raised by all competence testing is what to do with students who don't meet the requirement. Typically they are placed in some form of writing course or series of courses that are considered likely to help them improve. However, with this structure comes a broad set of problems. Some are logistic or political: the department that offers this course (almost always the English department) gets disproportionately burdened with a huge number of sections of a "service" course and the legions of underpaid adjuncts that generally accompany them, and a disproportionate amount of scarce institutional resources are directed toward this particular enterprise. Other problems, perhaps more worrying in the larger scheme of things, are pedagogical, and centre on the problems that attend a course in which writing floats free of a larger rhetorical context—what Russell (1995) and others have castigated as "General Writing Skills Instruction" or GWSI.

A WAC requirement therefore seems like something of a solution to the dilemma of competence testing. If students who do not meet the requirement are required, not to take a separate "writing" course, but to enrol in some specified number of designated writing-intensive or WAC courses, they will receive the benefits of discipline-situated instruction and no one area of campus is unfairly burdened (or blessed, depending on how much funding is attached) with doing this job on its own.

Of course, one might ask why we would need a test at all if a well-established WAC program is available to all students. Normally, the only sensible answer must be, "Well, we wouldn't." But what of institutions in which WAC is relatively marginalized for either philosophical or financial reasons? Good writing-intensive courses are apt to be expensive: they usually feature small sections, and it can be difficult to find sufficient numbers of faculty members interested in teaching writing and willing to, or capable of, undertaking the ongoing faculty development required to do it well. Where WI courses are not in sufficient supply or held in sufficient regard that all students can be required to take a robust number of them, writing competence testing can offer a mechanism for seeing that students who really need it are channelled into WAC without having to make WAC a complicated and possibly expensive universal requirement. The test identifies the problem; the WAC program provides the solution.

### **Why This Partnership Is Dangerous: A Case Study**

As noted above, I am now convinced that this relationship between WAC and competence testing, though attractive, is so fraught that it is seldom worth the risk. I have been reluctant to come to this conclusion, as it represents the unravelling of a long-held administrative scheme of my own, by means

of which I had hoped to be able to establish an effective WAC program at the University of Calgary. To contextualize this, let me back up and compress almost three decades of writing program history at the University of Calgary into a few paragraphs.

The University of Calgary has had a fairly well developed institution-wide writing test, known locally as the Effective Writing Test, since 1976. The test is a fairly well-managed example of the genre. It asks students to produce a fully developed essay which is marked by two assessors, on larger-order criteria as well as surface correctness. Theoretically all students must pass it before beginning their second year, giving underprepared students a window of grace to bring themselves up to snuff through the Writing Centre or by other means. However, a wide variety of exemptions for high school English scores, university-level first-year English courses and optional non-credit writing courses means that the test in practice works as a placement test rather than a pure admission test, streaming students into one of a number of ways to demonstrate that their writing already is, or has been made to be, up to standard.

As an administrator who has had varying degrees of responsibility for this system over almost the entire twenty-eight years of its life, I have often been tempted to try to set in motion the processes that would do away with it. I am not convinced that it succeeds very well at either of its twin missions of placement and certification, and it comes with all the baggage that has made high-stakes testing suspect throughout the rhetorical community. Alderson and Banerjee (2001) summarize these objections crisply:

The limitations of a one-off impromptu single writing task are apparent. Students are usually given only one, or at most two tasks, yet generalizations about writing ability across a range of genres are often made. Moreover, it is evidently the case that most writing, certainly for academic purposes but also in business settings, takes place over time, involves much planning, editing, revising, and redrafting, and usually involves the integration of input from a variety of (usually written) sources. This is in clear contrast with the traditional essay [on a competence test], which usually has a short prompt, gives students minimal input, minimal time for planning and virtually no opportunity to redraft or revise what they have produced under often stressful, time-bound circumstances. (p. 228)

These arguments are fairly commonplace, and I don't want to do more than allude to them now.<sup>1</sup> My point here is that one of the reasons I stayed my hand from moving too abruptly against the test was political rather than pedagogical. The University would doubtless be more than happy to save the budget committed to the test and to downscale services such as the Writing Center, and might well feel little need to replace it with a relatively expensive

alternative such as a robust Writing Across the Curriculum program. My strategy, therefore, was to let the test remain on the institutional radar screen until I could generate interest in something to take its place.

I was bolstered in this strategy by the experiences of a colleague at Laurentian University, Laurence Steven. Writing about the experience in an article optimistically titled “The Grain of Sand in the Oyster: Competency Testing as a Catalyst for Attitude Change at the University,” Steven describes the ways in which the forces of WAC at Laurentian were able to use a test as a lever to create a WAC program that I have long envied. In Steven’s narrative, the presence of a competence test created an institutional climate of dialogue—sometimes strained dialogue, but dialogue nonetheless—about what to do about students who could not seem to pass it nor find room in the English course required of those who did not. The ever-increasing pool of students stranded in this institutional limbo kept up the pressure for administration to find a more workable solution. The result was a mixed system in which the test was used as a device to sort students into writing-intensive courses across the curriculum with varying degrees of compulsion.

It was this success story that persuaded me at the time to avoid tampering with our test. Steven writes:

To drop the test in the near future because it seems antithetical to aspects of our current ethos would perhaps be to lose the catalyst for change, perhaps not. Aviva Freedman acknowledges that “the symbolic power of a test is immense” (17). And clearly ours has acted, and continues to act, as a spur to Laurentian to keep writing at or near the top of our list of priorities. Before dropping it, we would need an infrastructure to support the programmes already developed and to ensure faculty participation. (117)

For these reasons, then, I did not make as many threatening gestures toward the test as I might otherwise have done, despite the fact that it is antithetical to my current ethos for all the reasons cited above.

The reason such political contrivances are necessary at the University of Calgary is a very long tradition of WAC resistance. For instance, a proposal to establish a relatively modest WAC program in 1992 foundered partly because it would have been too expensive and partly because of faculty resistance. The report of the Academic Programs Committee notes,

During their deliberations, members of APC were made aware that many members of faculty are unwilling or feel themselves unable to evaluate the quality of student writing and to make it a factor in the evaluation of student work. Indeed, instances were reported to the Committee in which members of faculty had been explicitly told not to do so. Fewer were willing to pro-

vide assistance to improve student writing. (1-2)

To make a very long story short, this resistance has resonated through the intervening decade with no sign of abating.

The literature is full of depressing stories of this nature. However, the meat of the present story lies in the unfolding of my alternative strategy to use the Effective Writing Requirement to leverage WAC.

As noted earlier, students are exempted from the requirement if they attain a sufficiently high grade (currently B- or better) on any first-year English course, even though the English department offers no composition courses as such and ends up exempting most students on the strength of a literature course. Therein, I thought, lay a potential chink in the anti-WAC wall. If we trust our colleagues in the English department to certify students as acceptable writers on the basis of their performance in literature, surely we would trust colleagues in other departments who are arguably neither less nor more qualified to assess writing than are professors of literature. If the university was not willing to create WAC from the top down, perhaps I could use the continued existence of the Effective Writing Test and its many exemptions as a way to create a WAC-like entity from the other direction—that is, by gradually certifying writing-intensive courses outside the English department as qualifying for exemption from the test. This seemed to be working reasonably well at Laurentian, despite some mixed reviews from colleagues in the trenches of that institution. Ultimately, I hoped, I might be able to gain enough traction on WAC that I could begin taking steps to dismantle the test.

In the remainder of this article, I will attempt to articulate several reasons why I now think that this strategy of using the test to drive WAC was wrong. In doing so, I don't simply wish to add one more to the depressing list of local WAC failures, although I am aware that in one sense I am doing exactly that. Rather, I want to use the University of Calgary experience to articulate reasons why WAC and writing competence testing make dangerous partners.

### **Problem One: Shifting the Ground**

First, I want to take up the delicate stresses between a WAC and a WID model of discipline-based writing courses. In an often-quoted recent article, McLeod and Maimon argue that the dichotomies between WAC and WID are largely false ones constructed from extreme cases, and that WAC and WID are variants of a common mission (2000). I find these arguments largely convincing. Nonetheless, there is still a material difference in programs that emphasise writing-to-learn and those that emphasise learning-to-write in the disciplines. The former use various kinds of writing to help students reflect on, study, actively manipulate and therefore to “learn” the content of a discipline. The latter, on the other hand, foreground the different, though often comple-

mentary, goal of learning to write—specifically, learning to write as a historian, a physicist, an art critic might write, with the epistemological constructions that come in tow (Bazerman 1988). Learning to write in the disciplines works well under some of the special conditions that makes writing to learn work: a relative absence of prescriptive and formalist assumptions about how writing works and how the teaching of writing works.

This delicate balance is hard enough to maintain in any WAC program. When that program is figured (if only in the minds of some of the instructors) as being chiefly a response to a “writing requirement,” not only does the job of the WAC instructor feel more “remedial,” as discussed above, it also shifts the balance sharply from “writing-to-learn” to “learning-to-write.” Feeling under pressure to help students learn to write because a test has shown that current students don’t meet the university’s “standard,” instructors find it hard not to feel that the mission of writing to learn is less important than the mission of learning to write—not just in the sense of learning to write in the disciplines, but in the sense of learning to write according to generalized standards of “correctness.” Particularly when the test that got students in there in the first place is a test of grammar (see Martin 2003), or even partly on generalized surface conventions (as is the case with the Effective Writing Test at the University of Calgary), it would take more than a few faculty workshops to convince the average faculty member that the job does not reduce to the inculcation of correct form.

The pedagogical damage can be particularly severe because one of the chief advantages of a writing-to-learn stance in a WAC setting is that it gives tacit permission to the discipline-specific instructor to adopt new pedagogies without having to shift fundamental objectives. That is, the instructor, though sensitized to ways of helping students improve their writing, can continue to see himself or herself primarily as a historian, physicist or art critic who simply uses writing as a means to help students become more engaged with and reflective on these areas. If the status of the course is artificially shifted to learning-to-write (if only in instructors’ minds) as a result of its being a means of fulfilling a writing requirement, most conscientious instructors would feel compelled to step into a learning-to-write role, whether comfortable with that role or not. The frequently noted comment of the instructor in this situation is generally some form of “I don’t have the time/training/interest/skill to do that on top of all the other things I have to do.” Teaching students to write thus becomes an added burden on top of the “regular job” rather than an integral part of it.

Administrators of most WAC and WID programs, whether tied to a test or not, hear these complaints all the time, of course—as did the committee examining the University of Calgary’s potential for a WAC program as noted above. I argue, however, that formally attaching WI courses to a writing re-

quirement in many ways legitimates these complaints by casting the course as a way to fix a deficiency rather than as a way to use writing to help all students learn better.

### **Problem Two: Raising the Stakes**

Not only are stakes raised for the instructor, they are raised for students as well. To articulate this second problem, I need to make another brief digression to discuss one of the more successful forms of quasi-WAC to be found at the University of Calgary: the first year seminars offered through my faculty, the Faculty of Communication and Culture.

Communication and Culture houses many of the interdisciplinary programs that might otherwise be offered in a more traditional Faculty of Arts and Science (in the organization of Canadian universities, faculties are mid-level organizational groupings above the level of a department, much as a college or school might be in a U.S. institution). In keeping with the University of Calgary's mandate as a research-based institution, the first-year seminars we offer (titled General Studies 201) follow the "academic content" model (Murphy 1989). Throughout the term, instructors work with students on an extended research project, broken down into manageable, cumulative subprojects, coaching them on matters such as focussing topics, finding material, writing research papers, and sharing findings through oral presentations. The teaching of writing, like the teaching of the other skills, is done bottom up rather than top-down. Students are given "just in time" instruction as they are coached through the process rather than "just in case" instruction up front.<sup>2</sup>

Because the course is centered on the production of a research paper, and typically uses a wide variety of writing-to-learn techniques to get there, I see the course as an excellent example of WAC in practice. Therefore, in keeping with the strategy of using the test to drive WAC that I mention above, I raised the idea of allowing the course to qualify as an additional Effective Writing exemption. Although certifying various other courses across the curriculum for Effective Writing exemption has remained problematic, it seemed that General Studies 201 was an ideal candidate to be given this (as I thought it at the time) honor. An inquiry seminar in which writing is at the center of the inquiry process could be an important seed for a WAC program.<sup>3</sup>

In deliberating this question among the cohort of instructors who regularly teach the first year seminar, I was initially surprised by the level of resistance I received. Some was the usual I'm-not-qualified-to-teach-writing gag reflex that so frequently arises at such junctures. But there was another strand to the resistance that I think is more thoughtful, and which I am convinced is telling me something important about the relationship between WAC and writing competence testing.

One colleague contributed the following comment to the faculty list-

serve, where this discussion was running with some vigour:

My conceptualization is that it is more important to foster development than it is to ascertain that students have attained a certain mastery of the course subject matter or writing skills. However, by linking the assignment of a certain grade (B- was suggested) to the equivalence of a pass in the Effective Writing Exam, my ability to motivate students is being limited. For example, I may have a weak group of students, who work very hard, or would be motivated to work very hard, by the promise of a better grade, but I am prevented from so motivating them because assignment of a grade of B- or better should indicate that they have attained the equivalence of a pass in EFWR.

Upon reflection I see a good deal of wisdom in this comment. It illustrates a quite different objection from the usual it's-not-my-job argument, By linking superior performance on any one course to the fulfillment of an external high-stakes requirement, the stakes in the course itself are raised. I would differ from my colleague in that I would prefer not to characterize the problem quite so crisply in terms of ability to motivate students by dangling a grade. Nonetheless, I have to agree with his concern that an explicit connection to a writing competence requirement has the potential to raise writing from one of a complex set of goals and strategies to an over-riding emphasis on certification. The standards of the university ultimately come to rest on the shoulders of any course that takes on this burden, to the possible detriment of progressive pedagogy.

We can see this concern in a different form in a comment from another colleague:

I am also concerned about what allowing B- to stand for EFWR would do to class relationships. My students have always enjoyed the “unthreatened” atmosphere of my 201—not that there are no standards, of course, but as courses go it is relatively constraint-free. I’m afraid bringing in the EFWR would skew the course in the direction of grades chasing.

The first-year seminar works the way it works in part because the writing-to-learn pedagogy upon which it is founded emphasizes experimentation and chance-taking in a low-stakes atmosphere. A mediocre grade on a particular interim assignment is merely a sign to students that they need to rethink what they are doing, consult with the instructor and peers, and get the project back on track. If they were put in a threshold situation in which a low B- would exempt them from the Effective Writing Requirement (with its potential to

block them in their course of studies), and a high C+ would not, the low-stakes atmosphere would become a high-stakes game in which students are motivated to do everything possible to get that extra 1/10 of a point that will ensure that they are over the line.

Returning to the Laurentian experience, I can see how it also illustrates the problems that can be caused by confusing WAC with certification, despite its positive aspects. Faced with this content/competence dilemma, some instructors found an interesting but disturbing way out of the bind by setting separate exam questions for students identified as “WAC students”—that is, students who were in the course because they had not yet achieved the writing competence standard. Among the other essay questions on the exam would be one that was scored purely on writing competence rather than understanding of history, physics or art criticism. If students did not display competence on the “WAC question,” they were not certified as having met the WAC requirement. It’s hard not to marvel at the ingenuity of this strategy, but it’s also hard to imagine anything farther from the fundamental WAC principles of integrating language and learning.

The Laurentian program has now been largely dismantled. The proximate cause is, as so often happens, a change in administration, a severing of the program from its upper-administration supports, and a flurry of budget-cutting measures. Ironically, the administration offered to keep the test even while it was threatening to cut the writing-intensive course structure, a “compromise” that the faculty members associated with the program vehemently rejected. Local politics and economics, again—but it is hard for me not also to blame the yoking of the WAC program with large-scale competence testing, a partnership destined, I believe, to perpetuate the conflicts I have outlined.

## **Conclusions**

As noted in the introduction to this essay, I don’t want to argue from two case studies that WAC and competence testing cannot and should not ever be linked. With a clear awareness of the pitfalls, possibly others in environments more congenial to WAC can make this partnership work in the ideal way noted in the section headed “Why Combining Testing and WAC Looks Attractive.” But the general conclusion that I take from this survey of local histories is that WAC programs are generally well advised to keep themselves as far away from writing competence testing as they can. Certification of competence is like the rays of the sun. Dispersed, it sheds a certain amount of pleasant light and warmth. Focussed to a single intense point through a magnifying glass, it can burn a hole in your jacket. When WAC courses become formally linked to writing competence certification driven by an institution-wide test, the focus on certification can become so tight that the delicate balance between writing-to-learn and learning-to-write can be seriously endangered. The high

stakes of the test can be imported into the course, and the goals of situated writing can become deeply compromised.

This essay may seem to end on an irretrievably gloomy or even bitter note, since it chronicles what I see as a total failure of one of my schemes to institute WAC. However, now that I have backed away from my ill-considered attempt to link them to the Effective Writing Test, let me say that I am immensely optimistic about the WAC-like entity represented by the faculty's first-year seminars. As long as I don't try to link them to the competence test, no one castigates them as "remedial." No one has ever refused the chance to design a small-enrollment seminar based on his or her research passions. And so far, no-one has really complained that what they are doing in practice turns out to look a lot like WAC. They turn out for meetings on inquiry-based pedagogy, and find that classic WAC techniques of writing-to-learn blend easily into the business of learning-to-write-research-papers. They seem comfortable developing close ties with the library on one side and the writing center on the other.

In short, other forms of "stealth WAC" are possible and desirable even in an institution that appears far more committed to testing writing than to teaching it. As I argue more fully elsewhere, first year seminars offer themselves as an alternative means of accomplishing many of the goals of WAC within a somewhat different framework that may have more cachet with students, faculty members and administrators alike than the full-frontal WI program that the University of Calgary rejected a dozen years ago. I have made no inroads on the test, but I have WAC roots spreading rather nicely underground whether I call it that or not. The final lesson I take is that in environments where a WAC/testing partnership proves too dangerous to be workable (arguably, almost everywhere), there are other ways to leverage WAC. I would advise others to consider these alternatives before making a Faustian bargain with testing.

## References

- Alderson, J. C., and Banerjee, J. (2001). Language testing and assessment (Part 1). *Language Teaching* 34, 213-236.
- Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping written knowledge: The genre and activity of the experimental article in science*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P.
- College composition and communication position statement on writing assessment*. Retrieved July 30, 2004 from <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/assess/107610.htm>
- Donahue, P. (2002). Strange resistances. *The WAC Journal* 13, 31-41.
- Freedman, A. (1993). Show and tell: The role of explicit teaching in the learning of new genres. *Research in the Teaching of English* 27, 222-251.
- Freedman, A. (1998). University tests of writing: A counter proposal. *Indirections* 13:

19-24. Quoted in Steven.

- Martin, E. V. (2003). (Re-)establishing a WAC community: Writing in new contexts at Governors State University. *The WAC Journal*, 13, 43-57.
- McLeod, S. and Maimon, E. (2000). Clearing the air: WAC myths and realities. *College English* 62, 573-583.
- Minutes of the ad hoc meeting regarding academic literacy. (1991). University of Calgary (Unpublished).
- Moon, G. F. (2003). First-year writing in first-year seminars: Writing across the curriculum from the start. *Writing Program Administration* 28, 105-118.
- Runciman, L. (1998). Ending composition as we know it. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* 2, 44-53.
- Russell, D. (1995). Activity theory and its implications for writing instruction. In J. Petraglia (Ed.), *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction* (pp. 51-78). Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Steven, L. (1991). The grain of sand in the oyster: Competency testing as a catalyst for attitude change at the university. *Textual Studies in Canada* 1, 115-144.
- White, E. M. (1996). Power and agenda setting in writing assessment. In E. M. White, W. D. Lutz, & S. Kamusikiri (Eds.), *Assessment of writing: Politics, policies, practices* (pp. 9-24). New York: MLA.

## Notes

1. The College Composition and Communication position statement on writing assessment provides an excellent summary of cautions against arhetorical competence testing, as does Edward White (1996).
2. These seminars are described in much greater detail in two papers I have submitted to the *Journal of the First-Year Experience* and *College Composition and Communication*.
3. For examples of other institutions that have followed this evolution from composition to First Year Seminar as WAC, see Runciman (1998) and Moon (2003).
4. Patricia Donahue (2002) gives us a particularly stark look at this phenomenon in "Strange Resistances," an article that makes one wonder why the profession has any WPA's left at all.
5. Brent, D. Reinventing WAC (again): The first year seminar and academic literacy. Under review by *College Composition and Communication*.

## **WAC Practices at the Secondary Level in Germany**

*by Melinda Reichelt, University of Toledo*

In his overview of the history of the WAC movement in the U.S., Russell (1994) describes the separation of writing instruction from content instruction within U.S. education. In the 1870s, he writes, a perceived literary crisis led to the creation of “uniquely American” composition courses, and writing instruction became separated from instruction in other subjects. By the 1940s, trends toward objective tests caused even less writing to be assigned in subject-area classes and thus a further separation of writing from content.

In the last several decades, educators in the U.S. have become interested in re-integrating writing into the curriculum. For secondary-level educators in the U.S., advice abounds regarding implementation of WAC practices (e.g., Duke & Sanchez, 2001; Farrell-Childers & Gere, 1994; Maxwell, 1996; Ruddell, 2005; Zimmet, 2000), and published case descriptions of teachers using a broad variety of creative approaches and techniques are available about the use of WAC in the sciences (Franks, 2001; Keys, Hand, Prian, & Collins, 1999), the arts (Jager, 2000), math (Artino, 1997; Horn, Zamierowski, & Barger, 2000; and McIntosh & Draper, 2001), history, geography, social studies (Acuff, 1997; Walker, 1996; and Wilson, 1996), and foreign languages (Brauer, 200). However, while individual teachers, schools, and programs in the U.S. have achieved success with WAC programs (see, e.g., the descriptions in Farrell-Childers & Gere, 1994, and Tchudi, 1993) as Ostrow (2001) writes, existent WAC practices at the secondary level “often seem to be the result of the efforts of a few like-minded colleagues rather than the outcome of any school-wide or district-wide commitment to WAC philosophy” (p. 38). While such local, individualized work allows for a high degree of creativity, it can also cause teachers to feel isolated and contribute to teacher burn-out.

In Germany, separation between content instruction and writing instruction has been less pronounced. Writing has long played a significant role in German education, especially for students attending academically rigorous secondary schools. Because school writing in Germany thoroughly integrates writing instruction and content instruction, school writing practices in Germany can serve as a valuable source of ideas for WAC approaches.

In order to learn more about the use of writing across the curriculum at the secondary level in Germany, I spent six weeks investigating WAC practices at a German *Gymnasium*. The German *Gymnasium*, composed of grades

---

five through thirteen, is the most academically rigorous secondary school-type in the German system and is attended by students who plan to pursue higher education. The last one or two years of the *Gymnasium* are often compared to the first years of university in North America. The *Gymnasium* where I conducted my research is located in a suburb of Kiel, Germany, a city of approximately 245,000 inhabitants in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein. This *Gymnasium* is located in a middle- to upper-class community, and most of the students who attend the school live in the surrounding neighborhood. It has a reputation for being especially rigorous. Prior to my study of WAC practices at this *Gymnasium*, I had conducted two previous research projects there, including a ten-month ethnographic investigation of German-language and English-language writing instruction (Reichelt, 1997, 1999) and a three-month investigation of understandings of “good writing” there (Reichelt, 2003).

As part of my research into WAC practices at this *Gymnasium*, I interviewed a total of nineteen teachers from the following subject areas: art, biology, chemistry, economics, French, history, Latin, math, music, philosophy, physics, physical education, religion, Russian, and social studies. (I had conducted extensive interviews with teachers of German and English for earlier research projects.) Interviews took place in the school library, lasted twenty to forty-five minutes, and were conducted in German. Teachers were asked about the purposes of writing in their subject areas, the types of writing tasks they assign, writing-related classroom practices, and their evaluation of student writing. I used open-ended interview techniques, which prioritize participants’ responses and interests and which allow the content and order of interview questions to be revised depending on the direction taken by the interviewee (see Preissle and LeCompte, 1984; Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte, 1999). In previous research at this secondary school, I had recorded interviews on audio cassette (with interviewees’ permission). However, I was better able to establish rapport with interviewees and elicit freer responses when I dispensed with audio recording and used note-taking as my sole means of recording. In order to analyze my findings, I transcribed my interview notes into English and sorted them according to subject area and the sub-topics of *purposes*, *writing tasks*, *classroom practices*, and *evaluation criteria*. In addition to interviewing teachers, I also attended classes, took notes on my observations, and collected writing prompts and student writing samples.

I found that in all subjects except physical education, teachers use writing as a means of both teaching and testing students. In general, the purposes of writing-related homework and in-class activities are to reinforce course content and to help older students learn and practice the methods and vocabulary of each particular discipline. In each subject, older students take in-class exams two to four times per academic year. Exams last one to three class periods, depending on grade level.

In most subjects, student writing is evaluated on content, linguistic correctness, and style, with these three criteria receiving varying emphases, depending on the subject. Most teachers emphasized that content is weighted much more heavily than linguistic concerns, except in foreign language writing and the writing done by younger students in German class. Teachers mentioned organization infrequently and were not familiar with the concept of “thesis statement.” In all subjects, students receive a grade on their exams, written comments, and perhaps oral feedback from their teacher addressed to the entire class. Teachers do not typically read students’ out-of-class assignments. Instead, in many subjects, students volunteer or are called on to read their writing aloud, which counts toward an oral participation grade. The teacher and class members provide oral feedback when a student reads aloud such an answer, and despite the fact that critique is quite direct, students are eager to read their work aloud and to receive feedback in order to prepare for exams.

Before the 1970s, writing assignments for German classes typically consisted of interpretations of literary texts or responses to quotations, either free-form or in the shape of an *Eroerterung*, an essay involving development of a thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Educational reforms during the 1970s encouraged teachers in all subject areas to assign tasks with clearly observable goals that encouraged critical thinking. The goals of these reforms were operationalized through a curriculum encouraging a close link between reading and writing about discipline-specific texts, and the development and implementation of a three-task format used in written exams given in grades 11 through 13 in most *Gymnasium* subjects. Based on an unfamiliar reading and/or visual, students answer a series of three or more questions requiring them to 1) summarize or describe the new material, 2) apply what they have learned in class to the new material, and 3) offer and justify an evaluation, comparison, or personal opinion regarding the material. (A *Gymnasium* teacher who developed *Gymnasium*-level English curricula in the late 1970s told me this three-part format was based on Bloom’s theories about cognitive development. See Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl, 1956.) Teachers use the three-part format as a template for developing questions for homework practice as well as for exams. The emphasis on critical, close reading of texts and writing tasks that call for application of discipline-specific methods to new materials plays itself out somewhat differently in each subject area, but the three-part format provides students with continuity and ample opportunity for developing writing skills across the subject areas. The following is a description of specific ways in which writing is used in various *Gymnasium* subjects.

## German

German is required in all grades of the *Gymnasium*, and writing is an important part of this subject. In grades five and six, students engage in a variety of writing tasks: they respond to questions about a story or short text they have read, they recapitulate in writing a text which is read aloud to them, they write text summaries, and they do creative writing, especially narrative writing. Students focus primarily on writing clearly and conforming to written conventions. In order to begin preparing students to write the text interpretation required by the *Abitur*, an exit exam students take at the end of the thirteenth grade, teachers incorporate writing that requires students to read texts closely. For example, they may ask students to read the beginning of a story and to compose an ending; to write a letter from the perspective of a character in a story they have read; or to read and then rewrite a story from a different character's perspective. In grades seven through nine, students continue with creative writing tasks and begin writing text summaries and recapitulations, which are intended to encourage close reading and to help students determine which aspects of a text are most important. Students also write informal analyses of short stories and other texts, often focusing on the relationships between characters, and they compose essays about controversial subjects. In grades nine and ten of German class, students begin writing the text-based *Eroerterung*, a persuasive paper in which students recapitulate the author's arguments, add reasons of their own both for and against the author's position, and then state and support their own stance. They also begin writing the forms needed for exams in the upper grades and for the *Abitur*. In grades 11-13, explicit writing instruction recedes in favor of discussion of the literary works under study, although teachers may discuss conventions for structuring assigned writing tasks. For homework and in-class exams, teachers draw on the three-part format typical of the *Abitur*. For example, one exam required students to compare the form and content of two poems they had not read before; to discuss what philosophy of life each depicted; and to attempt to identify the literary epochs from which each came, justifying their judgment.

In evaluating student writing, teachers are guided by the criteria delineated in the curriculum guide for German: linguistic correctness, content, organization, and style. Teachers agree that unless linguistic errors are particularly egregious, content is the most important of these criteria, and organization is the least crucial since the guiding questions students receive provide an organizing schema. (For more on German-language writing instruction at this *Gymnasium*, see Reichelt, 1999.)

## Foreign Languages

*Gymnasium* students not only engage in a substantial amount of writing in German, but also devote considerable time to writing in one or more

foreign languages. Students start English in fifth grade and must continue it at through at least tenth grade. In seventh grade, they must add either Latin or French and keep that second foreign language through the eleventh grade. Students have the option of adding a third foreign language—either Latin, French, or Russian—in the ninth grade, which they can drop at any time. In the twelfth and thirteenth grade, only one foreign language is required. Teachers commented that writing in one or more foreign languages, especially at the advanced level, trains students' overall linguistic sensitivity and often helps them with writing in German. Instruction in foreign language writing provides a "second chance" to students who failed to master the skills of reading critically and writing emphasized in the lower grades of German class.

In Latin classes, students translate Latin texts into German and write answers in German to questions about those texts. For English, French, and Russian classes, students write their homework and exams in the target language, and writing serves as a means of developing, reinforcing, and testing students' target language communicative abilities, grammatical accuracy, and use of vocabulary and idiomatic language. For students of Russian, who are faced with learning a third foreign language considered more challenging than the others, writing serves as a means of preparing for oral participation and for practicing the Russian script. In all foreign language classes, writing also serves as a means for teachers to check students' comprehension of assigned reading, including students' familiarity with the cultural and historical issues relevant to those readings. Students also learn to write texts for reasons unrelated to school. For example, students in English classes compose letters or e-mail messages related to travel or tourist arrangements, addressed to native English speakers or other non-native English speakers in Europe; students of Russian learn to write personal letters because many of them have friends or family in Russia with whom they want to correspond.

Beginning students writing in the target foreign language write dialogs, dictations, letters, texts about themselves, and narratives. As is the case in other subjects, many foreign language writing tasks are based on something students have read. For example, students may compose full-sentence answers to questions about an assigned reading, write outlines of such texts, compose a letter that could have been written by a character in a story they have read, or re-write a narrative passage in the form of an interview. Advanced students write text summaries and answer analytical questions about short stories, poems, essays, and newspaper articles. In the eleventh through thirteenth grade, foreign language instruction focuses on preparing students to write tasks like those that will appear on the *Abitur*. For example, one thirteenth-grade English class I observed wrote an exam based on the story "Three's Company, Four's a Crowd," (author unknown), a science fiction piece about a family who has two children in a society where only one is allowed. The family's older son is killed

in a struggle that ensues when government officials invade the home and attempt to seize the second child. Students responded to the following prompts:

1. Write a summary of the story and explain the expression “social conscience.” (20%)
2. How do use of language, imagery, and narrative technique create atmosphere and influence the reader to sympathize with the parents? (30%)
3. Do the parents deserve the readers’ sympathy? Discuss. (20%)
4. Overpopulation is only one of the problems mankind [sic] has to deal with. Name others and discuss how you think they might be solved. (40%)

Foreign language writing is evaluated on content, style, and linguistic correctness. The content of beginning students’ writing is graded based on communicative success. At advanced levels, the content score is based on students’ ability to compose a succinct summary of a text in their own words, to analyze the structure of a text (using discipline-specific terminology), and to express a well-reasoned opinion. Beginning students’ scores for linguistic accuracy are awarded impressionistically, and advanced students’ scores are awarded based on an error quotient (number of errors divided by total number of words). Writing for Latin class, which is done in the German language, is graded based on the same criteria used for German classes.

### **Geography, History, and Economic Policies**

Writing is used in geography, history, and economic policies to check students’ learning, to help solidify what they have learned in class, and to prepare them for oral participation in the next class session. Students in upper-level courses are given writing assignments intended to help them develop a deeper understanding of course materials and to examine authors’ ideas critically and independently.

In geography and history, students are taught how to read and interpret secondary texts through annotating and taking notes or creating written outlines, which their teachers check. For tests, younger students usually answer an essay question that requires them to summarize what they have learned, or they receive an unfamiliar map or diagram (e.g., climate- or economy-related) and demonstrate their comprehension of the information it conveys by filling in missing words on a chart or writing one-sentence answers to questions posed about the material. Older students write about the discipline-specific texts or visuals they receive, completing homework assignments designed to prepare them for in-class essay exams and for the *Abitur*. For example, for a twelfth-grade history exam, students were asked to summarize and answer several analytical questions regarding an excerpt of a speech about the future of Poland, given in 1848 by a representative to the German National Assembly. For a twelfth-grade exam in economic policies, students were asked to

answer the following questions, based on nine graphs, charts, and political cartoons they received:

1. Based on Germany's trade with the U.S., describe what effects variations in monetary exchange rates have on the import and export of goods and on the development of wage costs per unit in both countries. Include a discussion of the current situation. (Refer to figure 1.) (25%)
2. Describe, explain, and discuss the debate being held in our country about the "place of Germany" and the challenge of the globalization process. (50%)
3. Discuss whether globalization will lead to the fall or the advancement of humankind. (25%)

One particularly creative geography teacher at this *Gymnasium* had his advanced class write collaboratively and publish an article about the Panama Canal in a geography journal; they also composed and sent a critique of their geography textbook to the publishers, who later offered the new edition of the textbook to the *Gymnasium* free of charge. Additionally, this teacher requires his upper level students to write ten-page research papers similar to what they will write in the university. Such research papers are typically not assigned by *Gymnasium* teachers.

Students' writing in these subjects is graded primarily on content, but numerous, distracting linguistic problems can lower a student's grade. Older students are expected to be able to use discipline-specific terminology and a formal register.

### **Art and Music**

The primary purpose of written exams in art and music is to check students' learning of concepts in the discipline. In class, teachers do not provide overt writing instruction, and students' writing is evaluated primarily on content. In music class, younger students write only short quizzes in which they might answer questions about the origins of a type of music, what it expresses, and what stylistic means it employs. Additionally, younger students compose new verses to old songs and describe music they listen to in class. Advanced music students write exams in which they listen to an unfamiliar piece several times, reading along with the musical notes; they then describe it and answer questions requiring analysis.

Art students do little writing until the eleventh grade. At that point, writing about works of art is considered a valuable means of helping students process their ideas. Students in grade eleven through thirteen write exams in which they are presented with an unfamiliar piece of art and are asked to describe it, explain how it was produced, and discuss what is expressed through it. They may also be asked to summarize secondary texts about art. In a special

advanced art course, students are required to write texts to accompany the works they create.

### **Religion and Philosophy**

In religion and philosophy courses, writing serves as a means of testing students' knowledge of course content, including their ability to grapple with difficult issues and express well-supported positions regarding them. Teachers may use writing in religion classes to introduce Biblical stories and reinforce course content. Students write recapitulations of the Biblical stories they study as well as short opinion pieces about the meaning of Jesus' sayings or about controversial subjects such as shopping hours on Sundays. Additionally, since religion class meets only twice per week, students may take minutes during a class discussion and read them aloud at the beginning of the next in order to help them take up again the topic of the previous class session's discussion. For older students, the emphasis of exams is on expressing one's opinion in a well-supported manner.

In philosophy classes, students undertake little writing before the eleventh grade. At that point, for exams, students typically receive a short text to use as a stimulus for writing on a given topic, such as euthenasia. Students' writing is evaluated on the quality of its arguments and its level of detail.

### **Science and Math**

As in other subjects, writing is used in biology, chemistry, physics, and math to help students grasp course material, to teach them discipline-specific ways of thinking, and to check learning. In science, younger students may write summaries of a text they have read and discussed or a film they have watched. They may also take short tests that require mostly short answers and one essay answer, such as explaining in half a page how a bird flies. Older students write exams that require them to apply knowledge they have learned in class to new materials. For example, for a biology exam, students might receive a text and several visuals related to a specific geographical region, be asked to explain the reasons behind a given population change, and to speculate about how different circumstances might have led to different outcomes. In chemistry and physics, students write about their experiments, including descriptions of background information, hypotheses, procedures, observations, results, and reflections. For chemistry exams, an experiment is demonstrated or described for students, who have to write their observations and then their reflections on it, with numerical calculations and some prose. Students might be asked in a physics exam to describe the elements of a nuclear power plant, draw the plant, label the details and describe their functions, and discuss the risks of nuclear power. Math students might be asked to explain in writing their thought processes regarding solving various math problems.

Student writing in these subjects is evaluated on content, preciseness of descriptions, and clarity. Older students are expected to use discipline-specific terminology appropriately and to demonstrate that they can express abstractions and apply knowledge to a new situation.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

While many of the WAC practices described above seem different from typical U.S. practices, WAC practices in both countries value the notion of writing to learn. The three-part writing task format used at this *Gymnasium* requires students to read a text carefully and understand it well enough to be able to summarize it, and it provides students with the chance to probe a text with the help of analytical questions provided by the teacher. While the form used in Germany is not typically used in the U.S., its goals parallel the emphasis on writing to learn advocated in much of the WAC literature (see, e.g., Duke, 2001; Farrell-Childers, Gere, & Young, 1994; Gabaldón, 2001; and Maxwell, 1996). There are certainly many different means of achieving the goal of writing to learn. Since the use of writing as an integral part of classroom learning and assessment has a long history in Germany, it is worth considering adapting some German WAC practices to U.S. educational contexts.

For example, because it involves short, manageable writing tasks, U.S. teachers may consider using the three-part writing task as a way to introduce young students to close reading of texts. Instructors may decide that presenting students with unfamiliar material in exams is inappropriate, especially if students lack experience with this. However, teachers may want to experiment with using new texts or visuals for in-class activities and homework exercises since with new material it is easier to ask essay questions that require students to go beyond recapitulation of information to higher-order cognitive tasks, including application of disciplinary knowledge, methods and evaluation.

The first part of the three-part task involves summary writing, to which instructors may want to pay special attention. The difficulty of recapitulating new material in the form of a written summary should not be underestimated. In my teaching experience at the university level, I have found that most students have little experience with summary writing and struggle with this seemingly straightforward task. Because it requires students to determine which information is central to meaning, summary writing both demands and fosters close reading of texts. In my undergraduate WAC linguistics classes, I implement summary-writing as an in-class group activity each time students read a new textbook chapter. Students find summary writing so difficult that, at first, I guide them into it: They first complete chapter summaries I've written by filling in word/phrase blanks or reordering jumbled sentences, and later, they write summaries based on key terms I provide. Eventually, students construct their own summaries from scratch. Writing summaries of textbook chapters

helps students learn difficult course material because it requires them to identify the essential points of the textbook's chapters.

Teachers experimenting with the three-part task format may decide to share their ideas with one or more colleagues in their school, including colleagues in disciplines different from their own. This would provide students with writing-task familiarity across subjects and also provide teachers with a convenient means for generating writing prompts, allowing teachers to invest less time developing new ideas for integrating writing into their classroom instruction. Additionally, it would provide an important self-check for teachers who want to ensure that they are asking questions that tap a range of cognitive tasks, including recapitulation, application of previously-learned material, and evaluation.

Teachers may also want to introduce text-based creative writing similar to that used for younger *Gymnasium* students. Teachers in Germany typically avoid focusing on "free" story writing because they prefer to integrate reading and writing tasks, and they typically avoid personal writing because they want to protect students from having to divulge information about themselves. While U.S. teachers' priorities and concerns may be different, they may want to take advantage of tasks that capitalize on younger students' familiarity with and interest in stories on the one hand, while also requiring students to read texts closely in order to write about them. English teachers, for example, might want to experiment with students re-writing a poem in the form of a short story (or vice versa); history teachers might ask students to describe an historical event from the perspective of a teenager of the time.

*Gymnasium* teachers make their workload more manageable by responding orally in class to students' written homework, which students read aloud. Because students learn to receive and be satisfied with oral (rather than written) feedback on much of their writing, teachers' work load is significantly reduced, allowing instructors to integrate more writing into their classes. While such is not the custom in the U.S., American teachers might nonetheless experiment with this practice in their own classrooms. In my teaching experience, I have found that students' responses to this approach vary, but that students are more likely to respond well if they have been adequately prepared to give and receive oral critique in a large-group setting and if the instructor models receiving criticism of his/her own writing as well as giving constructive, tactful feedback on student writing to a student volunteer.

In U.S. educational institutions, English teachers have traditionally undertaken the majority of the labor of writing instruction, leaving them feeling overburdened and somewhat alone in their work. At the German *Gymnasium*, the responsibility for writing instruction (and grading papers) is more equally distributed across the faculty, and students are provided a plethora of opportunities to engage in writing for the various subjects offered by the cur-

riculum. Because the educational situation in Germany differs significantly from that of the U.S., wholesale importation of German educational practices may not be appropriate. However, information about WAC practices at the *Gymnasium* level provides a rich source of ideas for experimentation.

### Works Cited

- Acuff, J. 1997. The historical scrapbook project. *Exercise Exchange*, 43, 3-4.
- Artino, C. 1997. Writing in my calculus classroom: An evolution. Paper presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on the Teaching of Mathematics, Milwaukee, WI, Jun 20-21, 1997. Eric Document 461508.
- Bloom, B., Engelhart, M., Furst, E., Hill, W., and Krathwohl, D. 1956. *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals*. New York: David McKay.
- Brauer, G. 2000. Writing across languages. Advances in foreign and second language pedagogy. ERIC Document 439620.
- C. Duke and R. Sanchez, Eds. *Assessing writing across the curriculum*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Duke, C. 2001. Strategies to stimulate writing to learn. In C. Duke and R. Sanchez, Eds., *Assessing writing across the curriculum*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, pp. 1-14.
- Farrell-Childers, P., Gere, A.R., and Young, A. 1994. *Programs and practices: Writing across the secondary school curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook/Heinemann.
- Franks, L. 2001. Charcoal clouds and weather writing: Inviting science to a middle school language arts classroom. *Language Arts*, 78, 319-24.
- Horn, J., Zamierowski, A., and Barger, R. 2000. Correspondence from mathematicians. *Mathematics Teacher*, 93, 688-91.
- Gabaldón, S. 2001. La voz liberada: Writing to learn in a sheltered English class. In H.A. Scarborough, Ed., *Writing across the curriculum in secondary classrooms: Teaching from a diverse perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Jager, M. 2000. Integrating writing into the arts. *Journal of School Improvement*, 1, 38-40.
- Keys, C., Hand, B., Prain, V., and Collins, S. 1999. Using the science writing heuristic as a tool for learning from laboratory investigations in secondary science. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 36, 1065-84.
- Maxwell, R. 1996. *Writing across the curriculum in middle and high schools*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- McIntosh, M., and Draper, R. 2001. Using learning logs in mathematics: Writing to learn. *Mathematics Teacher*, 94, 554-7.
- Ostrow, V. 2001. The status of WAC in secondary public schools: What do we know? *Writing Across the Curriculum*, 12, 37-45.
- Preissle, J., and Lecompte, M. 1984. *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. Orlando: Academic Press.
- Reichelt, M. 1997. *First and second language writing theory and pedagogy at the*

- German secondary level*. Dissertation. Purdue University, W. Lafayette, IN.
- Reichelt, M. 1999. A cross-cultural perspective on writing curricula. *International Education*, 29, 16-42.
- Reichelt, M. 2003. Defining "good writing": A cross-cultural perspective. *Composition Studies* 31, 99-126.
- Ruddell, M.R. 2005. *Teaching content reading and writing*, Fourth Edition. Danvers, MA: Wiley.
- Russell, D. 1994. American origins of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement. In Bazerman, C., and Russell, D., Eds. (pp. 3-22). *Landmark essays in writing across the curriculum*. Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press.
- Schensul, S., Schensul, J., and LeCompte, M. 1999. *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews, and questionnaires*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Tchudi, S., Ed. 1993. *The astonishing curriculum: Integrating science and humanities through language*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Walker, D. 1996. Put it in writing: Using maps to stimulate writing in geography classrooms. *Journal of Geography*, 95, 158-61.
- Wilson, E. 1996. Writing-to-learn in the secondary social studies classroom. *Southern Social Studies Journal*, 21, 29-40.
- Zimmet, N. 2000. Engaging the disaffected: Collaborative writing across the curriculum projects. *English Journal*, 90, 102-6.

---

## Note Taking and Learning: A Summary of Research

*Françoise Boch, Stendhal University, and  
Annie Piolat, University of Provence*

### Introduction

The activity of note taking can be considered part of Writing Across the Curriculum. It crosses over all disciplines and has the two characteristics of Writing Across the Curriculum: note taking helps students learn, and note taking helps students learn to write.

Even though techniques for understanding and writing texts are widely taught and practiced throughout a student's school and university career, very few students are taught even basic "note taking" skills. This despite the fact that students are expected to take extensive notes during their courses across the curriculum, and despite the recognized usefulness of note taking for storing, learning and thinking about what is being taught.

The functional complexity of note taking has not been sufficiently accepted by researchers and teachers, undoubtedly because the representation concerning the knowledge and skills it involves has been minimized. Too often, note taking is seen as the rapid transcription of information by using a few condensing techniques, such as shortened words and substitution symbols, for the creation of an external memory whose only importance will be its later use. The work presented in this article shows that we can go much further than this minimalist view.

This paper provides an overview of the research carried out in the fields of cognitive psychology, linguistics, and teaching science relevant to this specialized form of writing (see also, Piolat & Boch, 2004). It briefly presents four aspects of note taking: (1) the principal functions of note taking: "writing to learn"; (2) the main note taking strategies used by students; (3) the different factors involved in the comprehension and learning of knowledge through note taking; (4) the learning contexts that allow effective note taking: "learning to write."

### 1. What are the functions of note taking?

Note-takers take notes to fulfill two major functions: to record information and/or to aid reflection. Over and above the drawing up of a simple memory aid, such as a shopping list, or a record of actions, such as a diary, one of the major aims of note taking is to build up a stable external memory in a form that can be used at a later date. Confronted with a diverse range of information-transmission situations, note-takers are striving to avoid forgetting

something. Note taking is an essential tool in many information-transmission situations. At the university level, which is the level we are interested in here, note taking allows students to gather information from lectures, books, or any other situation that they will later have to memorize or use in order to successfully complete their academic program. Storage methods vary from “copy-re-gurgitate” strategies, which have proven to be effective from a scholastic point of view, to more complex “reformulation-interpretation” strategies. These are less frequently used by students (Boch, 1999; Van Metter, Yokoi, & Pressley, 1994), probably because they are more risky: it is more difficult to faithfully reproduce the source information when this information has been reformulated rather than simply transcribed.

The use of note taking to store transmitted information often overshadows another important role—reflection. Note taking is an effective information-processing tool that is commonly used both in daily life and in many professions (Hartley, 2002). As such, it contributes to the carrying out of a range of intellectual processes, such as making judgments, resolving issues, and making decisions. The taking of notes can aid time-consuming, real-time thought processes, such as the resolution of mathematical problems. In this respect, notes are similar to a rough draft in that they allow information to be coded, thereby relieving mnemonic processes and consequently helping with the development of the solution (Cary & Calson, 1999).

Primary schools, secondary schools, and universities provide their students with no (or very little) help in acquiring the skills needed to successfully develop these two essential write-to-learn functions: (1) taking notes to stabilize the knowledge to be acquired and reproduced during “course question” type examinations and (2) taking notes to effectively resolve problems, whether this is understanding complex documents, writing reports, or solving algebraic equations.

## **2. How are notes taken?**

The average writing speed of a student is around 0.3 to 0.4 words/second, whereas a lecturer speaks at a rate of around 2 to 3 words/second. Unless everything is said at dictation speed, or students develop exceptional shorthand skills, teachers will never speak slowly enough for students to write down everything that is said. As a result, students intuitively develop processes and methods that allow them to record the content of lessons. Without going into detail about the linguistic processes used, which are well known, such as the use of abbreviations, truncating long words, and apocopes, we would like to briefly look at the markers in a speaker’s text that signal, more or less explicitly, the importance of what is being said. Note-takers are very attentive to these markers, which have a considerable influence on the quantity of notes taken.

The indicators that trigger note taking, identified by several research studies using quantitative methods (Boch, 1999; Branca-Rosoff & Doggen, 2003) are the following:

- Writing on the board: a very powerful indicator. (Teachers are well advised to choose what they write on the board carefully, as it's extremely likely to be included in the note taking!)
- "Dictation": when the teacher acts as if he or she is dictating the information (slow delivery, low vocal register).
- A title of a section or a list or the listing of information (which, moreover, are often written on the board).
- Definitions, catch phrases. (Even if students don't understand them, they overwhelmingly take notes on them.)
- Macro-textual planning indicators that organize and structure the classes (expressions such as "firstly"/"secondly" or "first question"/"second question").

All these indicators are very much tied to written communication. We can, moreover, assume that the information dealt with here has been subject to note taking by the teacher beforehand. The student intuitively recognizes it as important because the teacher has planned and often written it.

Alongside these indicators that trigger note taking, we can assume that some forms discourage note taking. We consider the following as "*inhibiting* indicators":

- Parentheses or asides: sequences that do not contribute to the organization of what is said and that we intuitively perceive as often being introduced with a lower intentional register.
- Interaction in class between the teacher and the students (responses by the teacher to students' questions) or, worse, between students.
- Prosodic phenomena, which are symmetrically opposed to those that characterize the trigger indicators: faster delivery, higher vocal register. These indicators often accompany the asides, parentheses, and digressions.
- Hesitations in speaking, which are probably signs that what is being said has not been planned by the teacher.
- Certain paraverbal indicators: when the teacher puts aside his or her notes or walks around the classroom, the student statistically takes less trouble to note what is being said at that time.

The point in common with all these inhibiting indicators is that they are the product of a real, oral communication situation. Because of this, information considered not planned because not written is not taken into account by the student. Yet, we can assume that it's during these moments that com-

prehension hangs in the balance: examples and explanations are given that could be useful to note. Teachers are therefore well advised, if they want such information to be taken down as notes, to say so explicitly to their students or use an explicit indicator such as “careful, this is important!”

In the case of the reading of texts, the favorable effect of various elements on comprehension, such as subtitle, numbering of the various parts, and introductory expressions such as *There are four types of ...* (Sanchez, Lorch, & Lorch, 2001) has been demonstrated. These indicators are used and also much sought-after because they encourage the pinpointing of important ideas as well as their organization within the text.

As already mentioned, one of the ways of responding to a note taking situation is, when possible, to use a method for processing the information as a whole (for a summary of the different methods, see Piolat, 2001). Nevertheless, it has been shown that most students, wishing to remain faithful to the teacher’s words and in order to reproduce them during examinations, adopt a linear method of note taking that gives the notes a relatively classic “textual” appearance. This objective is particularly clear-cut in notes taken by students at higher levels in the university system (Boch, 1999). The use of a variety of note taking methods is much more common in the professional world.

### **3. How does note taking facilitate the study of the different factors that play a role in the understanding and learning of knowledge?**

In general, students take notes in order to record information that they will need to learn at a later date. However, the result of taking notes is much more than the production of a passive “external” information store, as the note taking action itself is part of the memorization process and results in the creation of a form of “internal” storage (Kiewra, 1987). Furthermore, the taking of notes seems to ease the load on the working memory and thereby helps people resolve complex problems.

Note-takers are assumed to re-read their notes as many times as necessary for them to learn their content. Several papers have been written describing the modalities of this activity, comparing different ways of using notes (reading, highlighting, summarizing) and the impact of the different sources of information that are used during this learning process (handouts provided by the teacher, textbooks, student notes: Rickards, Fajen, Sullivan, & Gillespsie, 1997; Titsworth, 2001). The more the information learning process involves understanding and transformation operations, the greater the intensity and effectiveness of the learning process. Thus, it is better to highlight notes than to simply read them, and better again to summarize them (re-write them) than highlight them (Kiewra, Benton, Kim, Risch, & Christensen, 1995).

In all of the situations that have been studied, the way notes are taken is of the utmost importance. A matrix structure for recording information has

proved to be more beneficial than an outline structure, which is in turn more beneficial than the linear structure used by most students (see also Piolat, in press; Robinson, Katayama, DuBois, & DeVaney, 1998; Ruhl & Suritky, 1995; Smith & Tompkins, 1998). The highly favorable impact of a matrix structure is similar to that obtained by the production of a keyword tree diagram (also called a conceptual map: Gruneberg & Mathieson, 1997) during note taking (Dye, 2000; Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004). The reworking of notes in order to reinforce the structuring of knowledge also has an important effect on their effectiveness as a learning tool. The high degree of concentration needed for taking notes is another factor in explaining these results. Taking notes requires the attention to be more precisely focused on the access, sorting, and coding of the information than it would be when simply listening to a speaker or reading a document (Piolat, Olive, & Kellogg, 2004). Comments made by students have often referred to the fact that taking notes helps them remain attentive (van Metter *et al.* 1994). If the note-taker is not satisfied with simply understanding what is heard or read in an automatic and relatively shallow way, then, through the understanding process, existing knowledge is combined with the new information that is being received. The implication of these attentional resources is even greater when a method based on the selection of ideas is being used and when the information is laid out spatially across the page. A strategic control is thereby exercised over the whole of the understanding activity. In other words, by spatially organizing the information on the page, the conceptual links between the pieces of information presented during the lesson or in the book are increased. Note-takers will then make stronger connections between the information being received and that already stored in their long-term memory. This way of processing information is known as “the generation effect” (Foos, Mora, & Tkacz, 1994). Furthermore, a later review of the notes, whether or not it is associated with a re-organization of the information, reinforces the integration of the knowledge and its storage in the long-term memory. This learning has a positive effect, both on scores in knowledge tests and on the composition of essays using the knowledge previously noted (Slotte & Lonka, 2001).

The carrying out of intellectually complex tasks, such as solving of problems and reasoning, can also involve the use of notes as a form of external memory. Notes allow interim pieces of information to be “stabilized” for use at a later stage in the task, thereby easing the load on the working memory. This was investigated by Cary and Carlson (1999) using an experiment that required students to calculate the remuneration of salespeople (their fixed salary plus percentage of sales). In order to bring situational constraints into play, useful information such as hourly rates of pay, tables of hours worked, and sales figures were not simultaneously made available and therefore needed to be memorized. Some of the students were allowed to note this information on

a sheet of paper while they made the calculations and others were not. Cary and Carlson found that easing the load on the working memory through taking notes led to more correct results being produced, but, more significantly, the students who took notes developed more effective and more stable methods for working out the solutions. In another study (Cary & Carlson, 2001), students were asked to carry out a series of arithmetic calculations, with some partial results being useful for later calculations. Again, some of the students were allowed to take notes and others were not. Among all the phenomena observed, two results deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, at certain moments in the calculation of the solutions, taking notes turned out to be disadvantageous, so even those students who were authorized to take notes tended to rely upon internal memorization of the intermediary results. At each stage of the task, the students juggled between taking notes and internal memorization in order to obtain the best cost/benefit ratio. Secondly, the spatial formatting of notes was seen to facilitate the production of solutions, as such formats allow useful information to be presented more clearly than formatting methods that closely follow standard linear textual forms.

#### **4. How can note taking be taught?**

The functional complexity of note taking is such that at least three skills need to be taught: comprehension through note taking, producing notes, and the conscious management of the activity as a whole (Stahl, King & Henk, 1991).

##### *Comprehension through note taking*

Very little work has been done on learning conditions and measuring the evolution of the knowledge and skills used in note taking, whether for school or university students.

At the school level, some exercises that focus on specialist psycholinguistic treatments may be done, but comprehension is most commonly taught through the production of summaries (Vigner, 1991). Producing a summary involves sorting, selecting and combining the information contained in a text with a standardized language format (respecting spelling, syntax, linearity of the text). A student who masters the art of summarizing will be able to take notes in the form of “data sheets,” but summarizing is a difficult comprehension exercise to master, even for adults. Friend (2001) clearly showed that learning to extract information from a text, and then to sort it and classify it into a hierarchy is beneficial for first-year university students taking remedial courses to improve their ability to create texts. The effectiveness of this type of training is further enhanced by the fact that it also involves combining and generalizing the important pieces of information that have been extracted from a text.

### *Producing notes*

Analyzing a corpus of notes taken by students presents the same problems as analyzing rough drafts of documents: the notes produced by students having attended the same lesson or having read the same book will be extremely varied (Hadwin, Kirby, & Woodhouse, 1999). When taking notes, students no longer follow the same conventions as for the production of standard text; spelling, syntax, and the layout of information on the page are subject to significant changes.

This variability has consequences on the nature of the training that students should be offered. All students would benefit from making certain operations automatic. Analyses of corpora show that, within one lesson, students sometimes use several different representations for the same word showing that they are unsure about which representation to choose (Barbier, Faraco, Piolat, & Branca, 2004; Branca-Rosoff, 1998). Moreover, the application of a condensing procedure also has consequences: once finalized, abbreviations should be understandable and unambiguous, as the linguistic context of the abbreviated word cannot always be used to reconstruct their meaning.

Learning how to take notes from a spoken presentation, in terms of automating calligraphic, spelling, and syntactical processes, is a slow and gradual process (Bourdin, 2002). This is undoubtedly one reason why there is very little teaching of note taking skills at the pre-university level. Teachers in secondary schools are faced with teaching objectives that are not really compatible. Teaching how to condense information through the use of abbreviations leads to clashes at two levels: (a) between teaching correct spelling, which is never completely successful, and abbreviation techniques that alter words; (b) between the syntactical organization of ideas and the telegraphic style. It is undoubtedly for these reasons that some studies have placed the emphasis on the use of note taking methods, such as tables, diagrams, and concept mapping, that are largely based on the use of key words: spellings are not changed, and the notes are unfettered by syntax.

An examination of the physical layout of notes once again raises the question of the prevalence of linear formatting when pupils learn about textuality. Thus, when asked to study a large document and extract information that can be used to formulate an argument at a later time, students sometimes juxtapose ideas that they have found in completely different parts of the document (Piolat, G erouit & Roussey, 2002-2003). It's as if the words could automatically form a text. Skipping lines, leaving spaces, and using separators are all part of teaching note taking (Garcia-Debanc, 1990).

Another way to consider note taking, in direct relation with the principles upheld by Writing Across the Curriculum, is to conceive of it as a tool for rewriting. An experiment carried out among French teenagers (Besson-

nat, 2000) has shown that, by giving notes taken during classes the status of *starting point* and no longer that of *arrival point* of the writing activity, the high school students put more meaning into this activity, which can sometimes seem useless to them. The students were instructed to use a written synthesis to explain to one of their newly arrived classmates a point that had been the subject of a class during which the students had to take notes, in this case, the functioning of French spelling. The teacher additionally provided them a written document on the same subject that the students were allowed to keep for only one hour, during which they could take notes at will.

Some of these notes were then enlarged and shown in the class. Comparison and reflection work was then done collectively, through questioning about the various aspects of note taking, including finalization, constraints related to rephrasing a source document, span of the segment taken down in notes, and faithfulness of the information compared to the source document. The students then worked in pairs to rewrite a passage of their note taking and compared their text with that of another pair that had been assigned the same passage. This dual task made it possible to better define the difficulties related to this activity and thereby to clarify where the stumbling blocks were.

The students listed four major difficulties as well as the pedagogical orientations making it possible to deal with them:

- the slowness of the graphomotricity (how to speed it up)
- the pregnancy of the linearity (how to schematize)
- the fascination of the source document (how to reword)
- the juxtaposition of information (how to sort it out).

Each of these lines of work was then subject to special training in which the students willingly participated, insofar as it was they who had drawn them out. We believe the interest of this type of approach lies in the fact that it makes visible, from a pedagogical point of view, the two major functions that are an integral part of note taking: writing to learn and learning to write. In our opinion, any approach regarding note taking truly takes on meaning only if it very explicitly incorporates this dual function that characterizes this special kind of writing and gives it its full pedagogical value.

#### *The conscious management of the activity as a whole*

The complexity of the cognitive operations and the knowledge involved in a process such as note taking require note-takers to actively control what they are doing and to master the way they work. This metacognitive knowledge allows them to plan their activity, to evaluate it and regulate it (Rémond, 2003).

Romainville & Noël (2003; Noël, Romainville & Wolfs, 1996) apply this metacognitive approach to note taking to help students overcome the numerous difficulties that they have at the beginning of their university studies. Their approach places students in a situation that is meaningful for them, where they can use their notes to prepare a summary of a lecture. At the end of the task, they help the students to deploy a metacognitive conceptualization by filling in a questionnaire (see box 1), the answers to which are analyzed in pairs.

**Box 1: Metacognitive questionnaire on note taking for students  
(adapted from Romainville & Noël, 2003).**

**Part 1: Your note taking during the talk**

1. Give a detailed description of how you took your notes during this talk. Give reasons, saying why you did what you did.
2. Are you satisfied with your notes? Why?
3. Compare your notes with those of a school student, shown on the colored sheet. In your opinion, which is better? Why?

**Part 2: Possible improvements ...**

4. If you had to start taking these notes again, what would you change? Why?
5. What advice would you give to the student, an extract from whose notes is given on the colored sheet, to help improve his/her note taking?
6. What could the speaker have done to help you with your note taking?

**Part 3: Your general note taking techniques ...**

7. Explain the purpose of note taking. What are its functions?
8. Do you always take notes in the same way in all of your lessons? Why?
9. How do you use the notes you take during your lessons? Do you use them as they are? If not, what do you do with them between the lesson and the exam?

These exchanges should be combined with systematic practice of a certain number of micro-skills, the lack of which was highlighted by the questionnaire and its analysis.

During work sessions, as well as through the fact that the tenants and end-results of this practice are collectively analyzed, the need to practice other micro-skills is demonstrated and addressed (see Box 2). Quality criteria for the students' notes are also revealed. Finally, the students are trained to transfer what they have learned to new situations.

**Box 2: Examples of micro-skills that may form part of note taking training for students (adapted from Romainville & Noël, 2003).**

**Raising awareness of the subsequent use of the notes:**

- starting from key words, reconstruct an oral presentation that is faithful to the original
- as above, but in several groups: compare what the different groups produce
- ask for a plan to be drawn up based on the notes
- answer questions using information from the notes
- highlight the linking words first in a text, and then in a presentation; replace them by signs

**Structuring your note taking**

- format a page of unbroken text
- go from one language to another (text/diagram/histogram/line graph)

**Introduction to reformulation**

- annotate a document in the margin (distinction between text and commentary)
- ask for notes to be taken from several points of view and compare them

**Introduction to selecting information**

- eliminate redundancies: same information repeated in different forms, obligatory conditions, expected consequences, structural redundancies
- eliminate certain examples: anecdotes and examples that illustrate the same rule
- put a title to each paragraph of text

**Conclusion**

The role of cognitive psychology in the understanding and production of texts is to analyze not only the result of these activities (what has been understood or produced), but also the activity itself (the mental operations and knowledge involved in understanding and writing). To date, note taking has not been widely studied because of its functional complexity and the need to develop methods in order to carry out such studies (Piolat, Olive & Kellogg, 2005). This functional complexity also accounts for the lack of specific note taking training in schools and universities. Teaching is limited to the production of summary texts involving the sorting, ranking, and reformulation of what the student has read or heard. Faced with the need to take notes, students develop their own methods and thereby become aware of the consequences and contradictions in their choices (Boch, 2001).

Learning to take notes well undoubtedly takes as much time as learning to write in a relatively experienced way (at least fifteen years according to Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991). Taking into account the different functional

aspects of note taking that have been mentioned, we believe learning to take notes involves the development of a range of skills that take several years to master. The aim of teaching note taking would be to help students progress not more quickly but in a way that their skills in using this indispensable tool are improved.

### Reference Points for Action

Faced with the complexity of the note taking action, teaching could focus on at least three aspects.

- In learning how to take notes, note-takers must develop their comprehension abilities within the framework of this particular activity;
- Learning to produce a formatted writing style, the semiotic characters of which are not those of canonical text formatting;
- Developing note-takers' self-awareness of how they function, in order to improve their control over these functions.

Practice simulations such as the ones discussed in this article help meet these needs.

### References

- Barbier, M. L., Faraco, M., Piolat, A., & Branca, S. (2004). Prise de notes et procédés de condensation en français L2 par des étudiants anglais, espagnols et japonais [Note-taking and abbreviative procedures in L2 by English, Spanish and Japanese students]. In N. Andrieux-Reix, S. Branca, & C. Puech (Eds.). *Ecriture abrégées (notes, notules, messages, codes...)*. *L'abréviation entre pratiques spontanées, codifications, modernité et histoire* [Abbreviative procedures: daily activities and historic perspective] (pp. 143-161). Gap: Editions Orphys.
- Bessonnat, D. (2000). Une année de réécriture en troisième [A Year of Rewriting at Secondary School], *Pratiques*, 105-106, 83-111.
- Boch, F. (1999). *Pratiques d'écriture et de réécriture à l'université. La prise de notes, entre texte source et texte cible* [Writing and Rewriting at University. Example of Note Taking]. Paris : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion.
- Boch, F. (2001). Prise de notes et écriture conceptuelle à l'université [Note Taking as Writing to Learn at University], *Pratiques*, 105/106, 137-159.
- Bourdin, B. (2002). Apprentissage de la gestion de la production et contraintes de capacité [Monitoring learning of writing and capacity constraints]. In M. Fayol (Ed.), *Production du langage* [Language production] (pp. 149-169). Paris : Hermès Science Publications.
- Branca-Rosoff, S. (1998). Abréviations et icônes dans les prises de notes des étudiants. [Abbreviations and icons in note taking by students] In M. Bilger, K. dan den Eynde & F. Gadet (Eds.) *Analyse linguistique et approches de l'oral. Recueil d'études offert en hommage à Claire-Blanche-Benveniste* [Speech analysis. Festschrift to Claire Blanche-Benveniste] (pp. 286-299).

Leuven-Paris: Peeters.

- Branca-Rosoff, S., & Doggen, J. (2003). Le rôle des indices déclencheurs et inhibiteurs dans les prises de notes des étudiants. Quelques contrastes entre scripteurs 'français' et 'étrangers' [Note-taking inhibitory and releasing cues by L1 and L2 students]. *Arob@se*, 1-2, 152-166 [http://www.arobase.to].
- Cary, M., & Carlson, R.A. (1999). External support and the development of problem-solving routines. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 25(4), 1053-1070.
- Cary, M. & Carlson, R. A. (2001). Distributing working memory resources during problem solving. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 27, 836-848.
- Dye, G. A. (2000). Graphic Organizers to the Rescue! Helping Students Link—and Remember—Information. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 32(3), 72-76.
- Foos, P. W., Mora, J. J., & Tkacz, S. (1994). Student study techniques and the generation effect. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86(4), 567-576.
- Garcia-Debanc, C. (1990). Proposition pour une initiation méthodique à la prise de notes [Technique for learning note-taking]. In *L'élève et la production d'écrits* [The writing of pupils], 93-138. Metz : Centre d'analyse syntaxique de l'Université.
- Gruneberg, M. M., & Mathieson, M. (1997). The perceived value of minds maps (spider diagrams) as learning and memory aids. *Cognitive Technology*, 2(1), 21-24.
- Hadwin, A. F., Kirby, J. R., & Woodhouse, R. A. (1999). Individual differences in note-taking, summarization and learning from lectures. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 45(1), 1-17.
- Hartley, J. (2002). Note taking in non academic settings: a review. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 16, 559-574.
- Kiewra, K. A. (1987). Note taking and review: The research and its implications. *Journal of Instructional Science*, 16, 233-249.
- Kiewra, K. A., Benton, S. L., Kim, S., & Risch, N., & Christensen, M. (1995). Effects of note-taking format and study technique on recall and relational performance. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 20, 172-187.
- Noël B., Romainville, M., & Wolfs, J.-L. (1996). La prise de notes à l'université : une approche métacognitive [Note-taking at the university: metacognitive approach]. *Éduquer et former*, 5-6, 47-58.
- Piolat, A. (2001). *La prise de notes* [Note Taking]. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Piolat, A. (in press). Effects of note taking technique and working-memory span on cognitive effort. In G. Rijlaarsdam (Series Ed.), *Studies in Writing*, & D. Galbraith, M. Torrance, & L. van Waes (Vol. Eds.), *Recent developments in writing process research (Vol.1 : Basic processes and word-level effects)*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Piolat, A., & Boch, F. (2004). Apprendre en notant et apprendre à noter. In E. Gentaz & P. Dessus [Learning by taking notes and learning to take notes] (Eds.), *Comprendre les apprentissages. Psychologie cognitive et éducation* [Understanding learning. Cognitive psychology and education] (pp. 133-

152) Paris : Dunod.

- Piolat, A., Olive, T., & Kellogg R.T. (2004). Cognitive effort of note taking. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 18, 1-22.
- Piolat, A., Roussey, J.Y., & G erouit, C. (2002-2003). Prise de notes par des  l eves de 10-12 ans plus ou moins bons lecteurs et r edacteurs [Note-taking by 10-12-year-old children. Effect of the writing and reading level]. *Rep eres*, 26, 277-291.
- R emond, M. (2003). Enseigner la compr ehension : les entra nements m etacognitifs. In D. Gaonac'h & M. Fayol (Eds.), *Aider les  l eves   comprendre. Du Texte au multim edia* (pp. 205-232). Paris : Hachette.
- Rickards, J. P., Fajen, B. R., Sullivan, J. F., & Gillespie, G. (1997). Signaling, Note-taking, and field independence-dependence in text comprehension and recall. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89, 508-517.
- Robinson, D. H., Katayama, A. D. DuBois, N. F., & DeVaney, T. (1998). Interactive effects of graphic organizers and delayed review in concept acquisition. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 67, 17-31.
- Romainville, M., & No el, B. (2003). M etacognition et apprentissage de la prise de notes   l'universit  [Metacognition and note-taking learning at the university]. *Arob@se*, 1-2, 87-96. [<http://www.arobase.to>]
- Sanchez, R. P., Lorch, E. P., & Lorch, R. F. (2001). Effects of headings on text processing strategies. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 26(3), 418-428.
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (1991). Literate expertise. In K.A. Ericsson & J. Smith, *Toward a general theory of expertise* (pp. 172-194). Cambridge: University Press
- Slotte, V., & Lonka, K (2001). Note taking and essay writing. In G. Rijlaarsdam (Series Ed.) & P. Tynj al , L. Mason & K. Lonka (volume Eds.), *Studies in Writing, vol. 7, Writing as a learning tool: Integrating Theory and Practice* (pp. 131-141). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Stahl, N. A., King, J. R., & Henk, W.A. (1991). Enhancing students' note taking through training and evaluation. *Journal of Reading*, 34(8), 614-622.
- Titsworth, B. S. (2001). The effects of teacher immediacy, use of organizational lecture cues, and students' note taking on cognitive learning. *Communication Education*, 50(4), 283-297.
- Titsworth, B. S., & Kiewra, K. (2004). Organizational lecture cues and notetaking facilitate student information processing. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 29, 447-461.
- Van Meter, P. Yokoi, L., & Pressley, M. (1994). College students' theory of note taking derived from their perceptions of note-taking. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86, 323-338.

\* **Note:** This article is a summary of a chapter from the book by Piolat & Boch, *Apprendre en notant et apprendre   noter*, 2004. This work was part of an AL 13b contract, Ecole et Sciences Cognitives, awarded by ACI.

---

## Outcomes from *The Outcomes Book*

by Jacob S Blumner

**Review of *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement*, edited by Susanmarie Harrington, Keith Rhodes, Ruth Overman Fischer, and Rita Malenczyk. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2005.**

Who would have thought that a seemingly innocuous two-page document describing what students should do when they leave first-year writing could engender an entire book, but defining a single set of outcomes for first-year composition is no ordinary task. Rhetoric and composition teachers are no ordinary group as exemplified in their self-naming as the “Outcomes Collective” rather than a committee because they didn’t believe the term “committee” fit. They believed “*collective* characterized the playful chaos that swirls around core questions, a chaos that eventually formed into the Outcomes Statement” (xvi). It’s striking then, as Peter Elbow notes, that “they [the crafters of the Outcomes Statement] managed to attain remarkable agreement among a very disparate but important group of leaders in the field” (178). So it seems fitting that many of the architects of the Outcomes Statement (OS as they call it) also wrote chapters in *The Outcomes Book* to flesh out the details and nuances necessarily absent from a two-page, bulleted list.

I admit to being skeptical when I first glanced at the book. Could the authors of the OS adequately critique it? And when Susanmarie Harrington wrote in the introduction that “this collection celebrates the Outcomes Statement; it also complicates it” (xv), I cynically wrote in the margins, “navel gazing?” Why, I asked myself, would the relatively new OS need an entire book to explain it and complicate it? If the creators questioned parts of the statement, what did they expect others to do with it? Specifically, what did they expect those who may not share the same values as compositionists, such as administrators and legislators, to do with it?

The book is broken into four parts: 1) Contextualizing the Outcomes Statement, 2) the Outcomes Statement and First-year Writing, 3) the Outcomes Statement Beyond First-year Writing, and 4) Theorizing Outcomes. My skepticism wasn’t quelled by part one; after chapters on the history of the OS, Cynthia L. Self and Patricia L. Ericsson critique the OS for not adequately addressing the “emerging technologies and their impact on literacies” (32). How

does the Outcomes Collective neglect such an important component of writing pedagogy?

The answer to my technologies question wasn't answered in part two, but I began to appreciate the purpose of the book. Four of the seven chapters describe site-specific examples of the Outcomes Statement benefiting institutions. Stephen Wilhoit's chapter describes Oakwood High School's curricular reform, how the OS helped teachers see the reforms as "a viable, important initiative," and that "teachers across the disciplines may come to believe that using writing to promote inquiry, learning, and thinking is not just another passing educational fad" (45). This chapter maps one way readers of *The WAC Journal* might develop stronger ties between high schools and higher education, the kind of connection that Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt advocate in their *College English* essay "Writing Beyond the Curriculum." Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem share their experience with using the OS and the importance of critical reading and writing. Readers will find this chapter helpful because it illuminates an aspect of all instruction I believe is neglected—critical reading—in very concrete terms.

The most compelling chapter of part two is Barbara Little Liu's "More than the Latest PC Buzzword for Modes: What Genre Theory Means to Composition," in which Liu questions whether the use of the term genre in the OS will be interpreted simply as a synonym for "modes." After critiquing the problem of simply teaching genre as modes, Liu offers what she terms a *genre process* approach that encourages assignments that allow students to engage material and explore genres at the same time. This enables students to learn how genres work and what their purposes are rather than simply writing to fill a form. Faculty will benefit from her discussion by considering the teaching techniques they use to introduce students to disciplinary genres.

Section three appears to be the most beneficial for *The WAC Journal* readers because it looks at the implications of the OS beyond first-year writing, but Martha Townsend opens the section with serious concerns about the implications of the OS. She writes, "I can't help but wonder whether the central values of the academy in general and of composition studies in particular—questioning everything, 'interrogating the text,' inquiring critically, acknowledging differing views, privileging argument—have gotten in the way of reaching agreement on the OS" (122), an observation that Elbow echoes later in the book. The criticisms of Self, Ericsson, and Liu focus my understanding of the OS and the book. The Outcomes Statement is flawed by compromise. But Townsend shows the potential as well, "The OS will provide a vocabulary of words and of concepts that allow faculty in the disciplines to engage in more meaningful conversations about their own pedagogy," and "the OS will help establish baseline expectations that composition teachers can rely on as they plan and teach subsequent material" (125). This potential could become

the basis for building successful WAC programs and stronger connections between first-year writing and other writing initiatives on campuses.

Townsend shows pitfalls and potential of the Outcomes Statement, and Robert O'Brien Hokanson writes as a "critical friend" to the Outcomes Statement and the commitment to improving the teaching and learning of writing it represents" (150). Hokanson's chapter, "Using Writing Outcomes to Enhance Teaching and Learning: Alverno College's Experience," is the best example of the potential for the OS, and the most inspirational essay in the collection. Early in the chapter, he writes, "the moral of this story has more to do with the process of developing and maintaining a language of outcomes than with the particulars of the language itself" (151), and what I most appreciated was Hokanson's explanation of how Alverno's outcomes developed over thirty years. The valuable lesson here is understanding the need to adjust and adapt the outcomes over time, and Hokanson presents a clear and reasonable example of how it can be done successfully. Additionally, he shows how it can be done across the curriculum, not just in first-year writing.

At the end of Ruth Overman Fischer's chapter entitled "The Outcomes Statement as Theorizing Potential," she summarizes the fourth section of the book and foretells my sense of the section and my initial reaction to the book once I'd finished it. In her final paragraph she notes that all of the authors of the fourth section, Marilyn Sternglass, Peter Elbow, and Richard Haswell, all "perused the Outcomes Statement through his or her own theoretical frame" (176), and all of them point out its failures. And as a final section that theorizes the Outcomes Statement, I was a bit perplexed to find such negative conclusions. Even Kathleen Blake Yancey has criticism of the OS in her *Afterward*.

I admit to being a bit stumped by the concluding tone of the book. Why would its editors conclude a book with theory (the underpinnings of our pedagogy) that is heavily critical of the Outcomes Statement? Townsend's quote earlier in this review about composition studies questioning everything may be a clue, but I've struggled to overcome the negative tone of section four. Harrington writes in the introduction that the theorists were asked to contribute, and that their criticism is a "floor, not a ceiling" (xvii), and that "Our hope is that this collection will encourage you to do three things: first, read the Outcomes Statement; second, consider your syllabus, your curriculum, and your program in light of the Outcomes Statement; third, do something" (xix). How do writing programs benefit and how do they suffer from such debate and consensus? What advantage is gained by having prominent composition scholars question the outcomes? Will it impact their adoption by writing programs or their effectiveness on campuses? I'm troubled by these questions. But the editors have accomplished their goal. I'm doing something: I'm thinking.

There is much to be gained from the book if we view the OS as an organic document that will grow and change over time. Though the authors

created and intended the OS primarily for use in first-year composition programs, it has implications and presents potential for all writing programs. Elbow writes, “The framers have done something important, useful, and very difficult. They took one of the most chaotic realms in all of higher education—first-year composition—and broke it down into clear goals” (178). These goals can be used as a foundation for developing writing programs throughout public schools and higher education, and the book provides useful models and theoretical discussion for those interested in adopting and adapting the outcomes to their needs.

## **Call for Proposals**

We solicit proposals for **The Eighth National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, May 18–20, 2006, at Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina**. We encourage proposals from all disciplines—and from cross disciplinary teams—on a wide range of topics of interest to faculty, graduate students, and administrators at two- and four-year colleges. These topics include: WAC: Writing Across the Curriculum; WID: Writing in the Disciplines; CAC: Communication Across the Curriculum, which includes oral, visual, digital, and written communication; and ECAC: Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum. The keynote address will be delivered by Anne Herrington and Charles Moran, both of the University of Massachusetts–Amherst.

### ***Proposal Deadline: September 26, 2005***

Please submit proposals in one of five session types—individual presentations; full panels; roundtable sessions; poster sessions; and pre-conference workshops—and in one of six broad themes—teaching; research, history, and theory; politics; assessment and program administration; technology; and topics that cross categories.

For program proposal forms and additional conference information, please see our Web site at [www.clemson.edu/pearce/wac2006](http://www.clemson.edu/pearce/wac2006). Please also feel free to contact the conference planners via e-mail, [wac2006-L@clemson.edu](mailto:wac2006-L@clemson.edu) or fax, 864.656.1846. You may also contact the conference co-directors: Art Young (864.656.3062) or Kathi Yancey (864.656.5394), Department of English, 616 Strode Tower, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634-0523.

# *the* WAC Journal

## **How to Subscribe**

The WAC Journal is an annual collection of articles by educators about their WAC ideas and WAC experiences. It is a journal of both practical ideas and pertinent theory.

Subscriptions: \$25 for the next three issues.

Make checks payable to Plymouth State University. Please include your e-mail address and mailing address.

Mail to: Angie Ricciardi, Managing Editor  
MSC 56  
Plymouth State University  
17 High Street  
Plymouth, NH 03264

E-mail: [aricciardi@plymouth.edu](mailto:aricciardi@plymouth.edu)

Phone: (603) 535-2831

## **Publish in *The WAC Journal***

The editorial board of *The WAC Journal* seeks WAC-related articles from across the country. Our national review board welcomes 5 to 15 page double-spaced manuscripts on all WAC-related topics, including:

- WAC Techniques and Applications
- WAC Assessment
- WAC Literature Reviews
- Interviews with WAC Personalities
- WAC and Writing Centers

Send inquiries, proposals or 5 to 15 page double-spaced manuscripts to Roy Andrews at [roya@plymouth.edu](mailto:roya@plymouth.edu). Manuscripts are reviewed September through February. Any standard document style (MLA, APA, etc.) is acceptable.

*The WAC Journal* is peer-reviewed blind and approximately 120 pages long. It is published annually in September.

