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Teaching With Writing

Spring 2011 - Print Version

Teaching With Writing: The WIC Newsletter

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Pre/Views: Thankful

I especially want to thank Bob Lillie (Geo) for his years of commitment and involvement with the WIC program. Bob is retiring from OSU this month and turning his expertise toward National Parks. Bob wrote to me earlier this year to ask what he could do for WIC before he retired. Those who attended his WIC lunch seminar in April know that the National Park Service is in for a treat when this gifted scientist and teacher is in their midst. Bob said in his e-mail that participating in the WIC seminar back in the '90's had changed the trajectory of his career. The truth is that Bob's many presentations for WIC over the years and his famous iterative writing assignment design have changed the trajectory of the WIC program and the design of writing assignments in many OSU disciplines. Thank you, Bob. We will miss you. Have fun!

Thanks to Michael Shum, who has brought his many gifts to the program as a WIC GTA this year. Congratulations to Mike on completing his MFA in Fiction this June.

The last thanks is also a good-bye to Travis Margoni, who has made so many contributions to the WIC program, first as the WIC GTA and then this year as the WIC Assistant Coordinator. In 2010, Travis managed the transformation of *Teaching with Writing* from a print newsletter to an electronic publication. This year as I added responsibilities for the Bacc Core to my duties, Travis took on the daily work of WIC faculty development, from consulting and syllabus design to organizing lunch seminars. He is a wonderful colleague and a fine writing program administrator.

Travis, thank you for everything. It's good to know, though you're in Utah, we'll still be able to catch the occasional Margoni sports critique or progressive political rant on Facebook and Twitter.

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New Outcomes for all WIC Courses Starting Fall 2011

The new WIC learning outcomes translate key WIC criteria and rationale into measurable outcomes. Drafted by the Baccalaureate Core Committee and reviewed by representative WIC faculty, these outcomes are designed to let students know what they will do as writers in their WIC courses. All WIC courses will have additional learning outcomes for the content, but these WIC outcomes state the baseline expectations of all WIC courses.

Next year the WIC program will offer faculty development opportunities for learning more about implementing the outcomes and improving student writing in the majors.

The list of new student learning outcomes for all Bacc Core categories is available here: http://oregonstate.edu/ctla/baccalaureate-core

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Collaborative Writing and Learning in the College Classroom

To begin, a few key terms need definition. The broadest of these, collaborative learning, is a term that generally suggests more than brief in-class group activities. According to Kenneth Bruffee's seminal book, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* (1993), collaborative learning asks students to "work on focused but open-ended tasks... in small consensus groups," to "construct knowledge" in a more real-world and mature way, and "learn the craft of interdependence" (1). Similarly, scholar Harvey Wiener emphasizes the value of the "group's effort to reach consensus by their own authority" (240). These definitions suggest that collaborative learning advocates student-centered education, in that it offers space for students to cooperate and problem-solve without the teacher's direct guidance. In this article, I use the terms "collaborative learning," or "collaboration," to refer to a specific pedagogy: an intentional use of teams or small groups to stimulate critical thinking, peer scaffolding or teaching, and communicating in a group setting in the classroom. Collaborative writing is a facet of collaborative learning and can describe activities with a range of styles and stakes; while writing is not always a part of collaboration, it is the focus here.

As the wide range of scholarship shows, there are endless variations on how to incorporate collaborative writing in order to encourage critical thinking, rhetorical awareness, peer scaffolding, and independence in both short, in-class activities, and longer group projects. Some ideas for short activities include:

» Think-pair-share: Students can think or write for a moment in response to a critical thinking question, discuss their answer with a partner, and then debrief as a large group (Millis and Cottell 99-100). While the strategy is often used with content-based learning, this form of collaboration can be applied to writing by simply directing the question toward a given assignment or other element of the class.

» Progressive writing: Students write for a few moments in response to a prompt, and then pass the paper to another student, who reads what is written and continues writing. This low-stakes writing activity help students to respond and adjust to other writers' ideas (Barkley, Cross, and Major 245), and so helps build the notion of writing as a social act, with a specific context and audience.

» Peer review: Feedback as a form of collaborative writing that can be used both in class and as an outside assignment. (See this article for more ideas about peer review.)

In longer writing assignments, collaboration may be employed either in group projects such as the traditional long report, in which the team will produce one collective document, or in individual projects where students guide each other during certain stages of individually written assignments. Any assignment should envision a specific audience, which is valuably emphasized in the collaborative aspect of the project, and may attempt to simulate a "real world" situation as much as possible in order to emphasize the importance of the writer's rhetorical situation in constructing the project. While a number of elements go into planning and carrying out a successful long-term collaboration, I'll highlight here a few of the key considerations in beginning and wrapping up an extended project.

As the class begins any writing assignment, a key element of student and project success is sufficient **preparation for the task**. In a group writing project, this should include some time dedicated to team building and developing "group cohesion" (Ede and Lunsford 123). One possible icebreaker is for students to discuss group members' Meyers-Briggs types. After completing a free online version of the indicator at home, students can talk about what their MBTI might mean in terms of work style, communication, and role in the group. Low-stakes writing activities, completed as a team before the project even begins, can also help students prepare for writing together and handling conflict resolution (Snyder). This could include progressive writing, brainstorming, or collaborative development of a short in-class assignment. Activities like these will help students write together, respond to each others' ideas, and find ways to coordinate styles and content.

In order to best promote the benefits of collaborative writing and learning, **the teacher needs to step back** and allow for groups to come to some consensus and understanding on their own. An instructor that joins groups freely in order to answer questions and have discussions with students actually reduces the collaborative efforts of the group, since all eyes are then turned back to the teacher rather than problem-solving for themselves (Weiner 243). This shift in power, from a teacher-centered to a student-centered classroom, is a challenge for many educators, and so may require a conscious effort. Nevertheless, the expectations and guidelines should be clear from the beginning, and so even as teachers resist guiding students through each stage, they should create specific assignment sheets and give feedback on group or individual drafts, so that students can gauge their performance.

Students also need an opportunity for **peer evaluation of their performance as a group** member throughout the process. Incorporating some peer appraisal throughout encourages communication and relieves stifled conflict, as well as offering an opportunity for the evaluated student to improve before the end of the project. Students should practice using concrete details in any evaluation, rather than vague accusation; this is a chance to practice quantifying, specifying, and clarifying through concise and direct language.

Some instructors base students' final grades on the group product as a whole and these peer evaluations, while others include individual performance on assigned sections in grades as well. Perhaps the best answer is a split one: how to grade depends on the level, goals, and subject of the class. Students should be told in advance, however, how their evaluations of peers will be used: an appraisal is often shared with an employee (or peer) as feedback to guide improvement, while evaluations that will influence grades may be kept private to encourage candid evaluation and reduce backlash from group members. Clarity about the audience for these documents will help students think carefully about the rhetorical situation of their work.

The techniques and approaches to collaborative writing are abundant, and new technologies and studies continue to influence how it is incorporated in the business and technical writing classroom. For instance, students today may use Google Docs, Blackboard, or Dropbox to share documents and collaborate from across town; this aligns with the move in the professional world to coordinate digitally, and so serves as valuable skill-building for students. Nevertheless, a well-designed activity or project in collaborative writing does more than prepare students for their future careers: it pushes them to challenge, communicate, and live up to others' feedback, as well as emphasizing audience, consensus, and interdependence.

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Responding to Student Writing Electronically: Where to Begin

Many basic principles for responding apply when instructors provide feedback electronically. Students benefit from seeing a scoring guide or rubric, and the assignment sheet should be available online so that instructors and students can refer to it as needed.

As with respondinig to a hard copy of a student paper, instructors will want to avoid spending a great deal of time editing or commenting on local errors, mistakes like comma splices, missing punctuation, and unnecessary capitalization. While students should be held accountable for such mistakes, making a note that a student exhibits a pattern of one or two local errors helps prevent students from feeling overwhelmed by a barrage of corrections. Rarely is it the appropriate role of an instructor to edit a student's paper.

Although some responders may feel an urge to turn on the "Track Changes" function in Microsoft Word to highlight mistakes or suggested revisions, it's too easy for students to hit "Accept All Changes." The revisions have been made by the instructor; furthermore, choosing not to use "Track Changes" might help instructors avoid making too many local comments.

It's always best to read the entire essay before commenting on it, whether responding electronically or on a printed copy of student writing. This can feel counterintuitive, but it will save time in the long run. An instructor may read through an entire essay and see that there are one or two major areas that need to be the focus of revision—so comma splices in the first page or a not-quite-perfect introduction might not merit attention on this draft.

Often, responding electronically simply takes place in Microsoft Word, and the documents are e-mailed to students. In some instances, instructors may want to take advantage of other online writing tools—Blackboard "Discussion Board" and Google Docs, in particular. Instructors may want to utilize the Blackboard "Content Collection" tool for gathering papers electronically; the website dropbox.com serves this purpose as well, but it requires that all students create an account. Using "Discussion Board" for proposals and feedback, from both peers and the instructor, is an effective way to engage students and their writing early in the process. Doing so may save time later in the term, and it can help to ensure that students are on the right track early in the writing process.

Instructors responding in Microsoft Word (or equivalent software) may want to use macros to quickly and easily insert comments made frequently on a particular assignment. Clicking View in the MS Word menu bar will reveal the macros button at the right of the menu. Instructors unfamiliar with how macros are recorded may want to take time to set up macros for practice; it's a simple process after being introduced to the function.

Responding to student writing electronically can save time and paper, and it creates a file that students can save and refer to quickly and easily in the future. Nevertheless, for first-time responders, there is a natural learning curve, an adjustment period. Instructors may want to respond electronically for the first time with a small class or on a short assignment.

For more information about teaching writing online, see Scott Warnock's book, *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* (2009). For instructors looking for more hands-on training, Chemeketa Community College offers a hybrid instruction certification and online workshop for a fee of $175.00.

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WIC Culture of Writing Award Winners

Department	Student & Title	Course	Nominated By
Design and the Human Environment	Ashley Nored "Urban Sprawl"	DHE 481	Leslie Davis Burns
English	Jackie Morgon "The Fall of Man in *Everyman*"	ENG 312	Tara Williams
Public Health	Elisa Rosenlund "Healthy Relationships Now and Forever"	H 476	Karen Elliott
School of Civil and Construction Engineering	Hussain Albaghli, Eric Horbatiuk, Benjamin Lawton, Jeffrey Sublet, Travis Thonstad	CE 418	Franklin Sherkow

	"Willamette Falls Locks Rehabilitation"		
BioResource Research	Andrew J. Larkin "Method Development for Extraction and Purification of Dermal RNA from FVB/N Mice Treated with Environmental PAH Mixtures"	BRR 403	Katharine G. Field
CLA American Studies (Cascades Campus)	Raime Hedman "The Nature of Walls and the Gathering Power of Humanity"	ENG 482	Neil Browne
Psychology	Pamela Lundeberg	PSY 301	Aurora Sherman
Fisheries and Wildlife	Bryce Siegel "Sometimes Zero is More"	FW 435	Tiffany Garcia
Human Development and Family Sciences	Krista Stangel "Enhancing Social Skills of Kids with Autism in the General Education Classroom"	HDFS 361	Sue Palsbo
Mathematics	Tegan H. Emerson		
Mathematics	Margaret-Rose "Rosie" Leung "Non-Lethal Conservation Strategies for Red Squirrels Threatened by Grey Squirrels"		
Honors College	AnnaRose Adams "Response of Reef Fish Assemblages to Overgrowth of the Hydrocoral *Millepora complanata* by the crutose alga *Ramicrusta* sp."	Honors Thesis	Mark Hixon

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WIC Faculty Fall Seminar Call for Participants
Faculty interested in the Fall 2011 Introductory WIC Faculty Seminar should ask their department chair to send an e-mail nomination to WIC Program Director Vicki Tolar Burton at vicki.tolarbuton@oregonstate.edu.

The seminar, designed both for faculty who plan to teach WIC courses and for those who want to use writing in non-WIC courses, will meet five Tuesday afternoons from 3-5 p.m. An honorarium of $250 is awarded to each participant upon completion of the seminar. Space is limited, so please register as soon as possible.

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Welcome to the New, Improved WIC Website
The WIC website's content is largely the same as it has been in the past, but organization—and, subsequently, navigation—has been improved. Faculty resources and student resources are at the left side of the homepage. The WIC Survival Guide is now more user-friendly; we encourage instructors to point students to this resource, and to provide a link on their course Blackboard pages. The Writer's Personal Profile has also been moved entirely to the new site.

Information about the WIC Culture of Writing Awards and a link to the College Writing Profiles is available under the "About WIC" menu at the bottom left of the homepage.

Finally, keep an eye on our poll at the bottom right of the page. We'll update it periodically with questions about your writing and teaching practices and needs. Thanks for reading, and feel free to share your feedback with us through the website. Contact information is available at the top right of the new page, and we appreciate your thoughts and insights.

CONTACT INFO