

Winter 2012 - Print Version

Teaching With Writing: The WIC Newsletter

Winter 2012 Pre/Views: Culture of Writing Awards Simplified

by Vicki Tolar Burton, Director



With the arrival of spring term, OSU academic units will have the opportunity to recognize their best undergraduate writers with the WIC Culture of Writing Award in the discipline. Units even get matching funds from the WIC program! Our goal this year is to simplify the process by which students receive the monetary awards by establishing one protocol which can be applied through any business center.

In past years, differing business center policies and procedure across campus have complicated this process—sometimes making the process so complex that departments have abandoned giving the award.

This much we know: It should not be this hard to recognize student excellence. We want one clear policy and procedure for WIC and academic units to use to recognize OSU's best undergraduate writers. And we want to publicize this simplified policy/procedure so that units have time to select winners for 2012 before June.

We have asked the University Administration Business Center for a policy and process that will work across the university, allow WIC to easily pay our \$50 toward the students' awards, and more importantly allow units to easily contribute their \$50 matching funds to the winning students (Yes, two split infinitives in one sentence. It's okay. Really.) We want units to be able to use either department or Foundation funds for awards.

The new policy appears on the WIC website at <http://wic.oregonstate.edu/culture-writing-awards>.

For units new to the Culture of Writing Awards, here are some possible models for selecting a winner:

- » The academic unit uses the department or school awards committee, who asks faculty to nominate and submit their best undergraduate paper for the year. The committee chooses the awardee.
- » The academic unit wants the awardee to be from a WIC course, so one or more WIC instructors select the best paper.
- » The top academic writing occurs in a capstone course with a team project. The unit selects the team with the best-written capstone project for the award. When the award goes to a team or four, some units divide the \$100 award 4 ways, while others contribute more than \$50 so that individuals will receive a more substantial award.
- » Because the only way a student at OSU can receive a monetary award is through a deposit in the student's account, the award must be given to a student who is currently enrolled.

The important thing is to recognize excellence in undergraduate writing. Students who have received the WIC Culture of Writing Award in their major have been excited to be recognized for excellence and happy to be invited to add their winning paper to the OSU Library's digital ScholarsArchive. Please consider bringing this award to your unit and this important recognition to one of your students in 2012. Direct questions to shumm@onid.orst.edu.

Guiding Student Writers: Mark Edwards on the Sociology of Writing

by Michael Shum

Mark Edwards did not set out to be a sociologist, but when he realized he had no greater vision for using his Food Science degree from UC-Davis than to contribute to the industrial food system—"making a better Twinkie," as he puts it—he decided to shift focus, taking a job as a chaplain for an interdenominational Christian student group at Chico State University. In the course of his six years in this position, Mark developed a curiosity about why the groups he worked with operated in the way that they did, and, more broadly, why generations of students change over time, and in what ways they change. Additionally, his role in helping students study the Bible served as the foundation for his eventual interest in the teaching of writing and literature. The communal-based, process-oriented approach he developed at Chico State eventually became the cornerstone of his pedagogy at OSU when he arrived in 1997. Along with Dwaine Plaza, Mark was instrumental in the creation of the departmental writing guide for Sociology in the late 1990s, a tool both familiar and indispensable to any Sociology major on campus. In the past year, Mark expanded the writing guide into a full-length book called *Writing In Sociology* (Sage Publications Inc.) that he hopes will become a standard text for both undergraduates and graduate students in the field. The WIC Team (Assistant Coordinator Michael Shum and GTA Zach Pajak) recently had the opportunity to sit down with Mark to chat about his book and his pedagogy, and we hope you find his insights as exciting and illuminating as we did.



Mark Edwards, Professor of Sociology, Oregon State University

Education

Ph.D. – Sociology, University of Washington, 1997

M.A. – Sociology, University of Washington, 1992

B.A. – Food Biochemistry, University of California at Davis, 1984

WIC Faculty Seminar, 1997

WIC Class Taught: SOC 315 – Methods I: Research Design

Departmental Writing Guide: [*Writing within Sociology: A Guide for Undergraduates*](#)

Favorite Writer: C.S. Lewis. When I look at the way he makes his arguments, he often uses analogy. I think that has become an important way for me to understand and teach things.

Mike: Let's start off by talking about your pedagogy, which is heavily process-oriented.

Mark: I think part of that is driven by the nature of the class I teach (SOC 315/316). From the beginning, we tell students they're going to write a paper like none they've had to write before. You have to propose upfront what you are hypothesizing, even though you don't know and I don't know what you're going to find. Now we're going to use some data neither of us have looked at and we're going to analyze it, and it's okay if you mess up. We're going to run into problems along the way, we're going to discover things we hadn't expected, and the class can help shape that. 316 is really the extension of 315, so students within the first week of 315 are told to settle on what their topic will be for the next two terms. By week 2, we're starting to hypothesize, and by weeks 3 and 4, we're exploring the literature trying to figure out what others have said, and by weeks 5 and 6, we're writing a review of that literature and borrowing from it selectively to create an argument. They take their paper forward into SOC 316 with the feedback I've provided throughout 315.

A big part of what I try to communicate is that the writing process is almost always non-linear. Often what will happen is that you'll come up with an idea because you're playing around with data. Even though we have to move in a somewhat linear fashion in the classroom, there's plenty of looping and going backwards. I always want to be honest with students about what it's really like to write. My students often say, "Oh, I thought I was the only one who did that. I thought I was the only person who was stupid, who couldn't find the right words, who stared at the blank screen for a long time, etc." I've found that being honest with students about my own writing struggles or the writing struggles of my peers—sometimes I'll tell choice stories I've been given permission to share—takes away some of the mystique of writing and some of that sense of self-hatred.

Mike: So that's how you go about creating a nurturing and empathetic atmosphere in the classroom, by essentially telling them, "I've been there too."

Mark: It's a bit like *confession and repentance*. I basically say, "Here's what I do: I procrastinate too. I pace around and curse at the computer. I get tired of reading things." My being honest with them is liberating for some students, both because they see that I do what they do, but also because I'm encouraging them to be honest about their own issues with writing. One of the things I've borrowed from Howard Becker's book (*Writing for Social Scientists*) is to have everyone sit in a circle and go around and ask: "What do you do when you write?" It basically pushes students to share all their weird and wacky habits that are part of their writing process, and they come to the realization that they are not uniquely crazy, and that everyone struggles with the writing process. I've tried versions of that in my class—I'll give them an assignment and say "If there was a hidden camera in your apartment or dorm room, leading up to the time of your writing, what behavior would it capture?" And they come in and sheepishly share things, and slowly realize, "Oh my gosh, half of us clean the place, and a fourth of us sharpen pencils, and a third of us can only work under certain conditions of acoustics and location." It's a way to create a space for people to say, "Writing is kind of a weird thing, and that's perfectly fine."

Mike: How would you characterize how your pedagogy has changed since you arrived at OSU in '97?

Mark: What's changed the most is that I'm older and they're not (laughs). Early on, I could really get away with talking about being one of them. Even though I was fifteen years older, it was easier to talk about my writing struggles as an untenured professor scrambling to get papers published, making sure I kept writing regularly. Now that they clearly see me as the same age as their parents, I can't get away with that. It's not as easy for me to talk about my own problems—"What do you mean?" they say, "you've published all these papers, and you have a book, etc."—I have to be more removed. I can't get away with the same kind of arm-in-arm feel.

Mike: What do you think replaces that camaraderie?

Mark: I'm more in a position of authority now, being the expert and saying, "You all shouldn't feel crazy because you have so much in common, and what you are experiencing is exactly what every other cohort has gone through the past fifteen years."

Zach: It may be even more reassuring for students to know that an expert who's published many papers in the field still grapples with the same things they do.

Mark: That's a good point. Whereas early on, I may have been the young guy still figuring out what he's doing, now I'm the guy who's had some success and who still admits to these challenges and weaknesses. For example, when I tell them about peer review, I show them letters that people have written me reviewing my own work. I select the most

vicious and unprofessional letters, because I want them to see that even professionals sometimes treat each other badly, and students need to know there is nothing I or anyone else can say about their writing that can be any worse—and I survived. At the same time, I want them to figure out how to communicate with each other in a way that's constructive and helpful. None of us likes to be told that after our best effort, something we wrote isn't very good. There are ways to communicate with each other how to improve without being mean or stupid. I know there are times when there will be a letter sitting in the mailbox that I know is a review of my paper, and I'll just let it sit there because I'm afraid of opening it and ruining my day.

Zach: What a great thing to have a class that not only teaches communication and writing in the field, but also heightens students' awareness to the realities of the field that are perhaps difficult to immediately come to terms with.

Mark: Well said. One of the things I really emphasize for people is that writing is an emotional experience. Your emotions are involved, the emotions of being afraid, the emotions of being hurt. Shame. All those really powerful things that are a part of other areas of life are profoundly present when it comes to writing. For most folks, they've had technical training—they've all had stuff about peer review, they've all had teaching on how to write sentences and paragraphs, and organizing all that—but I get the impression that most of them haven't thought very much about how they feel when they're writing, and why that matters.

Zach: As they're freeing feeling and emotion, they're freeing what they're able to do as writers as well. They're becoming comfortable in their own skin as people and as writers.

Mark: Right. That's why in the book I start with the story about the guy who'd been ashamed of letting his wife read his writing for a long time. He probably wasn't ashamed of other things that they shared and yet writing was something there that he didn't want her to see. I think that's very touching.

Mike: You used a lot of those kinds of narrative anecdotes and scenes in your book.

Mark: I do think that teaching by analogy helps a lot. For example, I like to tell students to imagine this big ballroom with all these people standing around talking. The reality is that's what the literature often feels like—there's a lot of people talking to each other, talking to themselves, sometimes in big groups, sometimes in smaller groups. If you're given the writing task of trying to figure out how you would capture what happened in that room, you're not going to go through and restate what everybody said. You're going to say, "There was this kind of conversation here, and this kind of conversation here, and this person here should really be in that conversation there." I'm hoping this analogy will be useful to students in cases, say, where they find one article, and they find another article, and the two articles don't even reference each other, but they look like they're doing the same thing. Do you have the authority to put them next to each other? Well, yeah you do, because it's your job to describe what was happening in that room.

Another analogy I use helps students recognize that an article is a piece of rhetoric that has within it a series of moves, just like a wrestler has moves. I point these out explicitly: "Look! Did you notice that move right there the writer just did, contrasting this with that?" Sometimes, I've shown them something I've written, and as we read through it, I'll say, "Okay, right there, did you see what I did? I didn't really know what I was talking about, and I had to bluff a little" (laughs). Sometimes being analytical about the moves that are part of the rhetoric is helpful.

Zach: It's a bit like knowing the moves well enough to determine *how* to best convey what you want to say.

Mark: Exactly. Students often say, "I know what I want to say, I just can't come up with the words!" I've wrestled a lot with this in teaching: when am I dealing with a thinking problem and when am I dealing with a writing problem? One can be terribly unclear and illogical and attribute it to a lack of vocabulary, but maybe you just haven't thought it through. A retired colleague, Rich Mitchell, once told me that "if it's pre-syllabic, it's unthought" (laughs). If you can't put a word to it, then I presume you haven't really thought about it, although you may have an intuition.

Mike: When a student actually has a decent idea but he or she is having problems verbalizing it, is that when you feel you can jump in and help them the most?

Mark: Yes. This is where I'll use diagrams a lot to help them think about relationships between variables. For example, education leads to income, and in that arrow, that's where all the theory and social processes are going on. What is it about education that increases people's income? Why would it do that? That's where the text comes in, to explain why. Now let's explain it to someone who's never thought about it. I'm pretty formulaic at first because for many of them, it really does turn back into a thinking rather than writing issue. "Oh!" they'll say, "I thought I just had one idea, but I really have three right there!" That whole notion is part of why what I learned from WIC felt so powerful: as you write, your thinking clarifies. You can't just go and think, think, think and then dump. Most of them don't get this, but they start to when they enter the class.

Mike: This speaks directly to the non-linear quality of the writing process we discussed earlier. I'm a fiction writer, and you never think of a story and just write the story. You always write a character and then the story emerges out of your writing. The story tells itself to you. It's a strange process that I think happens across all kinds of writing.

Mark: That's one of the things I really emphasize. In 315, I tell them the first thing I'm going to look at is your literature review with a lame introduction. I don't care if your intro is the lamest thing you've ever seen, because it'll change, and we'll fix it later. Just give me a few sentences about what this thing's about, and give all your attention to the lit review. Each time around, your intro will get a little better, and your lit review will get much better. There's got to be this movement back and forth, because what you present to me at the end is something that has to hang together as a whole.

Zach: A teacher I had at a screenwriting school, Richard LaGravenese (*The Fisher King*), used an analogy that I found extremely helpful. He said that writing is like ironing: You write a paragraph, and then you go over it. You write another paragraph, and then you go over both paragraphs.

Mark: I'm gonna use that! (laughs). That's really how I feel about it. Another confession I tell them is that after working on something for a very long time, I develop this love-hate relationship with my document. On the one hand,

I've grown fond of it because so much of me has gone into it. On the other hand, I'm so damn tired of it I don't want to look at it again. I just want to be done with it. I hope this helps them make emotional sense of why at the very end, they often just feel like saying, "Here, take it! I just want to be rid of it!" I tell them when you finish this paper, you're like a person who just cooked a very nice dinner with several courses. Don't slap it on a tray and slam it down in front of me. It comes down to a final professional presentation, proof-reading, making sure the margins are right, and all of that. It's not because I really care about margins. I want you to look like a professional who cared enough about what you produced that you present it to me and say, "This is so good I'm plating it on my best china!"

Mike: Do you have plans for revising or expanding the book in future editions?

Mark: A place I'd like to see it expand is I think that almost everything said in it is relevant to writing in other social sciences, particularly now that we're joined with Economics and Political Science. I regularly find myself with first-year Public Policy students having conversations that are right out of the book, so I either hand them the book or give them the link.

If it turns out that nobody wants to buy it, then I'll just keep making it available to my students. [As part of the arrangement with Sage, the book is a free resource for OSU Sociology majors, and all royalties beyond expenses feed back into the department to fund student travel and fellowships – Ed]. If people catch on and like it, then there might be some new things. For example, I published a paper in a teaching of Sociology journal about this technique I used called *Writing Before Students*. On the day they start their paper, I tell them, "Okay, I'm starting a paper too," and so I move along with them through the writing process. That really worked as an assistant professor because I was so driven to get papers done, and my students served as a kind of accountability group for me. Now that my job is complicated with administrative duties and whatnot, I just can't make that commitment. But I'd like to include in a future edition some of these kinds of ideas and techniques.

Learning through Reflective Writing: An Interview with Ann Marie VanDerZanden

by Zachary Pajak

Several weeks ago, an alert WIC Faculty Seminar alum forwarded to our team an article in *Science Daily* that described reflective-based writing assignments used in a horticulture and landscape design class at Iowa State University. The professor cited in the article, Ann Marie VanDerZanden, believes that infusing her class with these reflective writing assignments improves student performance both on her final and in the horticulture major overall, by providing students with their own means to learn and deploy the technical language of their discipline. These WIC-like ideas came as no surprise to Director Vicki Tolar Burton, because Professor VanDerZanden herself was an alumni of the WIC Faculty Seminar from 1999, and had taught the WIC Class in Horticulture at Oregon State from 1997 to 2003. We decided to give Ann Marie a call to catch up and learn more about this writing course making national news.



Ann Marie VanDerZanden

Current Position: Professor of Horticulture, Director of Iowa State University Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching

Education

Doctor of Philosophy, Washington State University, 1994

Master of Science, Cornell University, 1990

Bachelor of Science, Washington State University, 1988

WIC Faculty Seminar, 1999

WIC Class Taught: HORT 358, Landscape Construction

Favorite Book: *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer. I read a chapter out of it at the end of every semester. It's the kind of book about teaching that I love, about the impact that you can have on students if you just apply your own interests and passions, and how that can translate into effective teaching.

"In landscape, there is rhythm in a design," says Professor VanDerZanden. "Visual accents pull you through, and then you arrive at a focal point that draws your attention, and then you're kind of lulled through again, and then you arrive at another focal point, and it creates this rhythm and movement to the landscape." To enable students to describe, critically analyze and examine such nuanced elements of landscape design, Professor VanDerZanden applies exercises centered on reflective writing. As a result, she observes, "Students are even better at using language to describe their aesthetic taste, saying why they love one historical era [of garden composition] over another. They're now able to say, 'What I don't like about Roman gardens are the symmetrical balance, the structured rhythm of the design, and the focal points.' They learn to use very clear descriptors, apply it to a landscape, and say, 'On the other hand, I admire this English garden's more loose and amorphous rhythm, asymmetrical design, and a perceived lack of focal point.' Seeing

them making those connections with their writing gives me the opportunity to draw attention to their improvement in my feedback. It helps them see how their writing has been evolving.”

In the second week of her class, Professor VanDerZanden instructs students to describe in as much detail as possible the following photo of a typical residential landscape in Seattle; she chose to use this particular photo because its design is so different from landscape designs common in Iowa. This first installment of the reflective writing assignment allows Professor VanDerZanden to gauge everyone’s varying proficiencies of the discipline’s language: “Some students enter the course with a fairly sophisticated use of language in applying landscape design principles, whereas others are fairly novice in their use of the language of the field.” In week seven of the term, the students reflect again on the same photo, this time providing examples of how the principles of design learned throughout the course are demonstrated by the landscape. Finally, in their twelfth week, the students build on their writing with the professional language and style developed throughout the course, describing how the concepts, features, and design elements from various historical eras examined during the term—from ancient Egyptian designs to contemporary American designs—have influenced the pictured landscape. Since employing this assignment, students have been scoring significantly higher on the final exam and also carrying their reflective writing practices to other contexts and written assignments:



“Part of the background of the assignment is scaffolding their learning. They have this one image they see three different times, and we keep returning to it, in baby steps. Then we take this leap and they find their own image, and start applying the same method. They have been thinking more about their own thinking, and they begin seeing more clearly: ‘Ah, so it’s not just the same plant on either side of the door that I’m seeing, but a symmetrical design. And what I’m seeing is not just a long straight walkway that goes to the front door, but a focal point.’”

Professor VanDerZanden remembers, “I had this particular student who is a dancer, and she brought what she was familiar with to the assignment by looking at landscapes in the context of different types of dance. She talked about one as being a waltz. The bed lines were long and very curving, very gentle, and you could easily move through that whole space. And then another design that she was looking at had spaces that were very much divided up into distinct areas by shrubbery. She described moving from one to the other in a way that was like a flamenco dance. That’s how she was visualizing rhythm, but if it were just a stand-alone term, it would have been hard for her to really describe it.”

Professor VanDerZanden has applied reflective writing to her own scholarly research, particularly when writing a textbook with Tom Cook, a recently-retired professor at Oregon State University who was Professor VanDerZanden’s colleague in the Department of Horticulture when she taught here from 1997–2003: “He and I wrote a book on sustainable landscape management. I was working on the overall outline of a particular section, and I was using some types of reflective writing as I was pulling together things I had researched, things from conversations with Tom that would come up, and so on.”

Critical thinking, Professor VanDerZanden emphasizes, “is such a critical part of my discipline. Students have to be able to do critical thinking and problem solving, as it’s a big part of what horticulturalists end up doing. It’s hard to find relevant ways for students to do that within a course, but the reflective writing has helped them progress towards understanding the content, as well as given an organizational structure to use when dealing with new content.” Professor VanDerZanden adds, “It is also important to note that reflective writing helps students with metacognition and thinking about their own thinking and learning. This kind of thinking about their thinking helps them see their evolution as writers, and they can take it to other contexts of writing in the discipline.”

Lunch is on Us! The WIC Spring 2012 Lunch Schedule

by Team WIC

We’re extremely excited to announce the topics, guest speakers, and schedule for the WIC Spring 2012 Lunches. **This spring, all lunches will be held in Milam 215 from noon to 1 p.m.** If you have any inquiries regarding the lunches or would like to RSVP for any particular one, please contact Michael Shum at shumm@onid.orst.edu. As always, delicious American Dream pizza and beverages are on us!

Friday, April 13

What We Can Learn From Student Assessment: A Comparison of OSU and Our Peers on a National Writing Survey

Vicki Tolar Burton (WIC)

Every year, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) surveys students across campuses nationwide to find out

what's going on at their universities. We will look at a special subset of these questions that address writing (Consortium for the Study of Writing in College) and discuss ways in which WIC faculty can leverage this information from our own students to improve performance in the classroom.

Friday, April 27

Help Your Students Claim Their Professional Identity: Using Stories from the Field

Marjorie Coffey, Susan Meyers (English Department)

One of the most difficult challenges faculty face is helping students claim their own professional identities in their chosen field. Our presenters will describe how literacy narratives—autobiographical accounts of successful journeys made from student-to-professional within a discipline—can be used in the classroom to provide a working model for students who are making this transition themselves.

Friday, May 11

Going Global: A Panel Discussion on Teaching International Students in Your WIC Classroom

Greg Friedman, Byrne Brewerton, and Michelle Rutherford (INTO OSU)

With the advent of INTO Pathways on our campus, there will be a large influx of international students joining the general student population in the upcoming years. We've invited three instructors from INTO OSU to discuss the potential benefits and challenges that come with a classroom becoming more diverse and multi-cultural. Special focus will be paid to issues related to the teaching of writing in the disciplines, so please bring your questions!

Friday, May 18

Picture This! Understanding and Creating Visuals in the Disciplines

Zach Pajak (WIC), Emily Lemagie (Ecology)

Proposed frameworks for teaching visual literacy in the disciplines are often highly theoretical, expect students to begin at an expert level, or assume students have ready and privileged access to digital technologies. Our presenters offer ideas and insights into helping students effectively interpret and create visuals in ways that are more broadly, theoretically, and economically accessible.

CONTACT INFO

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