TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC)

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In This Issue

Responding to student writing

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Teachers across the disciplines recognize the importance of responding to their students' writing. That doesn't prevent them from sometimes dreading the physical burden that such responses can entail—particularly when teaching large classes. How can faculty members most effectively and efficiently fulfill this important responsibility?

A recent Harvard study provides useful suggestions for faculty members. This article will provide a brief overview of this study and outline its implications for teachers.

Initiated in the fall of 1997, the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, directed by Nancy Sommers, followed four-hundred students from their freshman year through graduation in 2001, carefully examining these students' experiences with teacher feedback. Through surveys, interviews with students, and careful analysis of all of their papers, researchers found that effective teacher response played a crucial role in student success at college:

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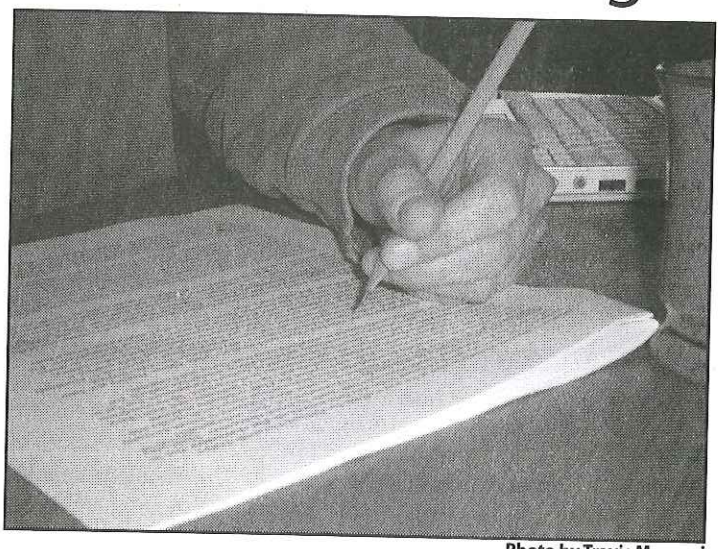

Photo by Travis Margoni

Responding to student writing is an essential skill as educators engage with students through the writing process.

Pre/Views: The importance of response

Lisa Ede
Acting WIC Director

Welcome to the fall 2008 WIC Newsletter!

And, yes, you are right: I am **not** Vicki Tolar Burton, Director of OSU's Writing-Intensive-Curriculum Program. Vicki is enjoying a well-deserved sabbatical this year, spending time at Wesleyan University in Connecticut conducting research, as well as in Corvallis. Vicki's book, *Spiritual Literacy in John Wesley's Methodism: Reading, Writing, and Speaking to Believe,* was just published in Baylor University Press Rhetoric and Religion series. I hope you'll join me in congratulating Vicki on this accomplishment and wishing her the best on her new research endeavors.

This year I am serving as Acting WIC Director while Vicki is on sabbatical. It's my job to keep Vicki away from the WIC office when she returns to Corvallis winter term and to keep the WIC program going, though on a reduced schedule. Because I also direct the Center for Writing and Learning (which includes the Writing Center and the Supplemental Instruction Program, a collaborative program with the Academic Success Center) and teach in the English department, I won't be able to offer the full line up of activities that Vicki usually does. For instance, there won't be a WIC seminar this year. But I will be hosting several WIC events each term, putting out the WIC newsletter, and consulting with faculty about new and existing WIC classes. So if you have any questions or concerns about OSU's WIC Program, don't hesitate to contact me.

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About Teaching with Writing

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Teaching with Writing is the newsletter of the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program. As part of the Baccalaureate Core, all OSU students are required to take an upper-division writing intensive course in their major.

The content of WIC courses ranges from Bioengineering Design to the History of Photography. While subject matter differs by department, all WIC courses share certain commonalities defined by the Faculty Senate:

- Informal ungraded or minimally graded writing is used as a mode of learning the content material.
- Students are introduced to conventions and practices of writing in their discipline and use of borrowed information.
- Students complete at least 5,000 words of writing, of which at least 2,000 words are polished, formal assignments that have been revised.
- Students are guided through the whole process, receive feedback on drafts, and have opportunities to revise.

For complete information on WIC guidelines, visit the WIC website at:

<<http://wic.oregonstate.edu>>

Responding to student writing

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"[F]eedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback—a transaction in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction" (Sommers Across 250).

What students need most, the research concludes, is a sense of exchange, a sense of being involved in a dialogue with their teachers and being a part of the conversation taking place in academia. They need to feel that, even though they are novices, they are members of the college writing community whose voices matter.

Faculty members can help students feel like members of their disciplinary community by providing feedback that is detailed, timely, and directed specifically to each student and essay. Such response from teachers engages with the "what" of a student's paper: what the student is saying, not just how she or he is saying it. It addresses the student, not the paper, and not simply the problems in a paper.

Further, the Harvard Study concludes that identifying and correcting problems should not be the primary goal of response. Often, instructors believe that they are not doing their jobs unless they identify every problem—whether that problem is global (an over-reaching thesis or poor organization) or local (an error of usage, punctuation, or grammar). This is not to say that response should not point out limitations in students' critical thinking and writing. The role of response is to provide guidance so students can improve their critical thinking and writing skills.

However, not all comments are equal. Vague comments or comments that feel rubberstamped do not encourage student growth. Students benefit from feedback that engages their ideas but also guides them toward expressing those ideas more clearly.

The Harvard Study suggests that faculty members can most effectively and efficiently focus on content, rather than on error. Surface errors can be dealt with by looking for and isolating patterns. Alternatively, teachers can follow the procedure suggested by Richard H. Haswell in his 1983 *College English* essay, "Minimal Marking."

"All surface mistakes in a student's paper are left totally unmarked within the text. . . Each of these mistakes is indicated only with a check in the margin by the line in which it occurs. A line with two checks by it, for instance, means the presence of two errors, no more, within the boundary of that line" (601).

Students are then given the opportunity to identify and correct these errors. In his study, Haswell found that, when given the opportunity to self-correct, students could identify 61.1% of their errors on their own. They needed the help of their teacher or of a handbook to identify the remaining errors.

When teachers focus on providing response specific to each student and paper, they encourage students to feel that they are members of an academic community. Doing so is worth the effort, and it is actually far less stressful to approach response not as a chore of correction but rather as a chance to connect with a student.

April Carothers recently completed an MA in English with an emphasis in rhetoric and writing. Her thesis, A Circle of Response: Addressing the Tensions of Teacher Response to Student Writing, *can be found here: <http://hdl.handle.net/1957/9270>.*

Works Cited

Haswell, Richard. "The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing; or, Looking for Shortcuts via the Road to Excess." November 9, 2006. *Across the Disciplines: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Language, Learning, and Academic Writing.* Editor Michael Pemberton. Vol. 3. 29 December 2006. <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/haswell2006.cfm>.

Haswell, Richard. "Minimal Marking." *College English* 45 (1983): 600-604

Sommers, Nancy. "Across the Drafts." "Re-Visions: Rethinking Nancy Sommers's 'Responding to Student Writing,'" *College Composition and Communication* 58.2, 246- 66.

---. HWP Harvard Writing Project Bulletin. Special Issue: Responding to Student Writing. The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2000.

Cross-curricular thoughts on responding

Travis Margoni
WIC GTA

While there are identifiable, effective methods for responding to student writing, instructors across the curriculum have unique practices that engage and guide students in their writing. Here we hope to relay specific ideas that instructors can use and adapt in their classes.

In addition, on page 4, please see a short list of suggested guidelines for students using instructor responses, taken from Lisa Ede's book *Work in Progress: A Guide to Academic Writing and Revising*. Providing students with feedback is only one part of the process; preparing them to use feedback will make the revised work even stronger.

Assistant English Professor Peter Betjemann said one of the first, most important steps for him in responding is to suppress his "idealization of perfectibility." While long comments addressing all the issues in a paper can seem generous, Betjemann tries to focus on two areas for revision.

With more local, sentence-level responses, Betjemann said he prefers to focus on the most common errors in class. Betjemann has a rather unique approach to commenting on these types of errors on papers: with stickers. He has printed pages of small stickers explaining five common errors: comma splice, its/it's confusion, semicolon use, block quotes with quotation marks, and run-on sentences.

Ultimately, Betjemann said he sees the development of student writers as happening across the curriculum, and over the course of students' college careers.

Here are additional thoughts on responding to student writing from faculty members across the curriculum.

Kevin Boston
Department of Forestry Engineering

Many of the classes in the College of Forestry combine a student presentation with a written report. Often, both of these assignments are due at the same time. I suggest that allowing the students to present their topics first and collecting the written report a week later results in better writing from the students. For many students, presenting to the class, their peers, is a difficult and stressful event. Thus, they will spend a significant amount of time organizing their talks to appear knowledgeable and organized.

If these assignments are due at the same time, less effort is often spent on the writing portion of the assignment as the social costs of failure in the writing, as perceived by the student, are not as high as the social costs of a poor presentation to their peers. Thus, the writing assignments are often given minimal effort regardless of the point differential between the presentation and the writing assignments.

WIC training tells us that requiring multiple drafts with feedback is a method that can be used to improve student writing. The oral presentation can serve as one of these drafts, as the talks in my classes have an introduction, methods, results, and conclusions that should be represented in a well-written paper.

Additionally, the presentation is another place where I can correct content and logical or factual errors that can be reworked before submitting the final report.

Brad Cardinal
Exercise and Sport Science

First, for all assignments I create a "scoring rubric." This allows me to be certain that different portions/areas of the assignment have been covered. Also, I have each portion/area "weighted" with different point values. The scoring rubric matches the assignment outline that the students receive at the start of the term. There are no surprises. The scoring rubric allows me to have some degree of objectivity, and it also allows students to see the essential elements I am looking for in a particular assignment.

Second, I also go over papers offering very specific feedback (much a like a journal editor might do). I show the students how they can reword, rephrase, or reorganize things. I don't always do this for the entire assignment, though. Rather, I'll show them some alternatives early on in the paper and ask them to consider those ideas when revising the remainder of the paper.

I also provide them with a summary of the key concepts or writing tips that should help them in revising the remainder of the paper. When I do this I give the students the opportunity to "revise and resubmit" for a higher grade. It is a fairly time consuming process, but the quality of the papers definitely goes up.

Sara Jameson
English Department Composition Coordinator

In WR 121, instructors try to prepare students for the writing they will do in their other college classes. To do this, we focus on the process of writing with multiple revisions, a concept often new to freshmen who are used to just writing a single draft, getting a grade, and writing a new paper. So we have to train students in how to interpret and use the comments we provide on their drafts.

First, we have to help the GTAs who teach our WR 121 classes develop effective ways to respond. Making comments encouraging and very specific – rather than the old fashioned "awk" in bleeding red ink – is more productive. Their comments need to be helpful and legible, not too much or too little.

For formative responses on works still in progress, we focus on global or higher order concerns, such as the ideas, thesis, and organization, to help students revise. We do that by writing questions in the margins to push critical thinking and composing an end note about the current state of the draft.

For example, the end note could mention three things that are going well so far, which might be good ideas, good title, good tone, etc., along with three things to work on for the next draft, which might include a tighter thesis or better transitions.

Summative comments on a final version help students see what to do on their next assignment.

When returning essays to students, it can be helpful to take a few minutes in class to explain what the comments mean and how to use them.

Students' WIC papers evolve into professional articles

Sergey Adamenko, Ruben Guzman, and Logan Richardson, three students who have completed Brad Cardinal's Nutrition and Exercise Sciences WIC course, EXSS 381 Analysis of Critical Issues in Exercise and Sport Science, have had articles accepted for publication in the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.* The articles evolved from papers written in EXSS 381 during the Winter 2008 term.

Congratulations to these students on their achievements! The citations are as follows:

Adamenko, S. (2008, Summer). "Is there a relationship between scholastic sports participation and academic performance?" Research brief. Oregon Alliance for Health, *Physical Education, Recreation and Dance e-Journal* [Online]. Available: http://www.oahperd.com/ejournal.php#article_two

Guzman, R. (2008). "A parent's perspective: My kid isn't fat." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 79 (7), 9.

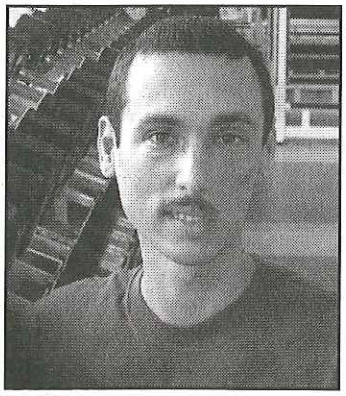

Photo courtesy of Pat Newport

Ruben Guzman

Richardson, L. (In press). "What does body composition say about your health?" *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.*

Please continue to share your students' achievements with the OSU WIC Program.

Pre/Views

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This is not my first involvement with the WIC program. When the WIC program was established in 1989, I served as its first Director while we searched for someone to assume this position. In 2001-02 I served again as Acting Director, so that Vicki could take her first sabbatical. I'm happy to be once again engaged with this important initiative on campus. In this regard, I am grateful to have the support and assistance of WIC GTA Travis Margoni. This is Travis' second year with the WIC program, and his knowledge and experience are proving invaluable. So thank you Travis.

This issue of *Teaching with Writing* covers a number of important topics. The majority of the issue is devoted to the practice of responding to student writing. April Carothers' article serves as background, providing a look at a recent Harvard study conducted by Nancy Sommers. In addition, we've compiled thoughts on responding from instructors across the curriculum at OSU, and they have shared a few of their best practices for others to consider. Finally, we celebrate the accomplishments of three undergraduate students whose papers from WIC courses in the Department of Nutrition and Exercise Sciences were accepted for publication in professional journals.

2009 WIC Culture of Writing Awards in the Disciplines

Save copies of your best papers from winter term and encourage your department to honor its best student writer.

Contact Acting WIC Director Lisa Ede at Lisa.Ede@oregonstate.edu or WIC GTA Travis Margoni at margonit@onid.orst.edu for details on how to participate.

Student guidelines for using responses

While instructors can put great time and effort into responding to student writing, the writing process can be more successful if students know how to make the best use of their instructors' comments. Below are suggestions from Lisa Ede's *Work in Progress: A Guide to Academic Writing and Revising* that instructors may want to share with their students.

1. Read your instructor's written comments carefully. They are the clearest, most specific indication that you have of how well you have fulfilled the assignment.

2. Read your instructor's comments more than once. When you first read them, you will be reading mainly to understand his or her general response to your writing. That's a useful reading, but it does little to help you set goals for revision. Later, read the comments again several times, looking to establish priorities for revision.

3. Recognize the difference between your instructor's local and global comments. Local comments indicate specific questions, problems, or errors. For example, "awkward sentence" is a local comment indicating some stylistic or structural problem with a specific sentence. Global comments address broader issues, such as organization or the effectiveness of your evidence. The global comments in particular can help you set large-scale goals for revision.

4. Meet with your instructor if you don't understand his or her comments. Even if you do understand the comments, you may wish to meet to discuss your plans for revision.

Ede, Lisa. *Work in Progress: A Guide to Academic Writing and Revising.* 6th. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

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