

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

Published in the WIC Office, Center for Writing and Learning, Waldo 125, (503) 737-2930

Vol. 3 #1, Fall 93

In This Issue:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Pre/Views from the New WIC Director | 1-2 |
| An Interview with Lex Runciman on WIC Roots | 2-6 |
| Checklist for WIC Course Proposals | 6 |
| Winter WIC Seminar | 6 |

Pre/Views by Vicki Collins

Joining the WIC Partnership

When I arrived at OSU in August, a transplant from the writing program at Auburn University, one of my first goals as the new director of the Writing Intensive Curriculum was to understand the history of the WIC program at OSU. Since using writing to learn new material is a basic principle of WIC, discovering the program's roots became my own writing-to-learn project and gave me a wonderful excuse to seek out people who were involved in WIC's creation.

Lisa Ede, Chris Anderson, Lex Runciman, and Jon Olson, to name a few, offered me not only stories but also a dearer gift: they reached out and drew me into the partnership that is WIC.

Through them I learned of other partners across the university--Michael Mix (Biology/Zoology), Kathy Moore (Philosophy), Cheryl Glenn (English), Bob Lillie (Geosciences), Stephen Chovanec (Art), Loretta Rielly (Library), and others--who are afire with enthusiasm about teaching with writing and who generously shared their WIC experiences with me and with the fall seminar participants.

The feature piece in this issue of *Teaching*

TOP 10 REASONS TO TAKE A WIC SEMINAR

10. You learn the latest ideas about teaching writing (hint: marking every grammatical error is out!).
9. It saves you time by making you smarter in designing written assignments.
8. You hear interesting guest speakers (WIC seminar graduates).
7. You learn how other faculty incorporate writing in their teaching.
6. Seminar writing groups foster interdisciplinary friendships.
5. You're doing something to improve your teaching as you become more sensitive to what student writers need.
4. It's not graded.
3. \$250 stipend.
2. Exercises! Articles! Handouts!
1. Brownies! Brownies! Brownies!

(Contributed by participants in the Fall '93 WIC Seminar)

With Writing (TWW), "WIC Roots," is evidence of the WIC partnership: excerpts from Jon Olson's 1992 interview with Lex Runciman as Lex left OSU and the WIC directorship for a position in the English Department at Linfield College.

I take great pleasure in making it possible for *TWW* readers to listen in on this conversation between two teachers of writing who have been so important in WIC's

successful beginnings. The writing-to-learn pedagogy you will read about continues to inform WIC courses and transform teaching for WIC faculty.

This column also gives me an opportunity to recognize the nineteen faculty participants who made the Fall WIC seminar such a lively and delightful experience: Chris Bayne, Zoology; Kim Beaumariage, Industrial Engineering; Doug Collier, ESS; Natalie Dollar, Speech Communication; Deltra Ferguson, Women Studies; Dan Hendrickson, ROTC; Goran Jovanovic, Chemical Engineering; Jon Kashchy, ROTC; Trischa Knapp, Speech Communication; Chris Langdon, Fisheries and Wildlife; Dave Loeffler, ROTC; Andrea Marks, Art; Len Moffitt, Political Science; Gerry Olson, HDFS; Manuel Pacheco, Philosophy; Wendell Phillips, ROTC; Greg Tokayuk, Foreign Language; Martha Wehrle, Art; and Bill Uzgalis, Philosophy. I am publishing their names not only to thank them but also so that you can ask them about WIC.

These seminar participants arrived at the seminar with varying degrees of belief or skepticism about whether writing could enhance student learning, not to mention a few secret doubts (later confessed) about their own writing processes. They read articles weekly, tolerated my Ross Perot-type flip charts, kept writing-to-learn journals (Goran shared a split-page entry in both Serbo-Croatian and English), formed in-class writing groups, shared classroom experiences, and asked great questions.

The "Top 10 Reasons to Take a WIC Seminar" is their collective effort. I'm not sure what to make of the fact that the top reason to take the seminar is for the brownies. Perhaps my mistake was to begin the last seminar with treats warm from the oven, but I suspect there is also some larger truth here--perhaps something to do with eating-to-learn.

Finally, I want to invite readers of *TWW* to become partners in the WIC experience. Send me your questions, your ideas for articles,

your classroom writing exercises that work, anything that might help other faculty who want to use writing in their teaching. If you want to propose a WIC course--or update your WIC syllabus--you may want to look at "Checklist for a Strong WIC Course Proposal" on page 6. I also invite anyone proposing a course to come see me and discuss plans before submitting paperwork to Academic Affairs. I can be reached at 737-7311 or collinsv@ccmail.orst.edu.

And if you haven't taken a WIC seminar yet, ask your chair to nominate you for the one beginning January 19, 1994. Join us in the exciting endeavor of teaching with writing.

WIC Roots: An Interview With Lex Runciman on Teaching With Writing

In the following interview, Lex Runciman articulates the vision of writing as a way of learning, a central concept of writing-intensive courses at OSU and of writing-across-the-curriculum programs nationwide. Runciman reflects on WIC's importance to students and faculty at OSU and shares practical wisdom on teaching with writing.

JON OLSON (Acting WIC Director, 1992-93): When the Oregon State University Faculty Senate mandated the WIC program, why did you think the university needed such a program, and does it still?

LEX RUNCIMAN (WIC Founding Director, 1990-92): Oregon State needed, and still needs, the WIC Program for two reasons. OSU's students--in fact, all students--need to be active intellectual participants in every single class period; if they're not, they're missing educational opportunities. And given the cost of higher education, that's a shame.

When a lecturer stops at the period's half-way point and says, "Take five minutes and write down one thing you're sure of based on what you've heard today; then write down one question you need to pursue"--that request asks students to be intellectually self-conscious about what they've been hearing. If that request is made on a consistent basis, it encourages intellectual self-consciousness as a habit. Students pay closer attention, and sleeping or drifting off during a lecture becomes less likely and more difficult.

WIC sounds like a teaching program as well as a writing program.

That's right, exactly right. Writing across the curriculum has as its primary aim to change student experience, to improve student learning. Our method of doing it is writing.

A faculty member in a WIC seminar may or may not teach a WIC course but will take some of those techniques to virtually every course that he or she teaches. You therefore have elements of the WIC program showing up in lower-division courses as well as in graduate courses. For example, you see it showing up in Bob Frank's mythology class, a class in which he teaches two hundred or more students and teaches them with certain writing-to-learn techniques.

The best way to change the students' experience may not be to add another required course. That will change their experience in one course, but if you change a faculty member's perception of what students in his or her course could be doing, then you change student experiences on a much wider scale.

I interrupted you earlier. You had other reasons why OSU needs the WIC Program.

OSU needs the WIC Program as visible evidence of its institutional commitment to undergraduate instruction. One way of rewarding faculty for their dedication to undergraduate instruction is to support

curricular innovations and provide opportunities for instructional development. The WIC Program tries to provide that support.

Faculty also need opportunities to talk with each other across campus, so that's a third reason why the program is important. One of the wonderful things about the WIC seminar is the opportunity it affords for a fairly intimate group of people with widely diverse disciplinary backgrounds to come together and talk about common teaching troubles and solutions.

Do most colleges define "writing-intensive course" in the same way?

"Writing-intensive courses" is an environmentally friendly term that is slippery and not very well defined. On some campuses, "writing-intensive" means that there is merely a nod in the direction of including writing in the course. On other campuses, there are word counts which specify how much writing must be included in the course. Some campuses require students to take more than one--sometimes four--WIC courses: two at the lower division, two at the upper division.

So the ways WIC courses are defined vary from campus to campus--and that's how it should be.

What single WIC technique has worked the best for you in the classroom?

The technique where the teacher shuts up and asks the students to do the thinking.

In the traditional teaching-by-lecture paradigm, the person doing the most thinking in a class is the one who is standing up in front trying to figure out what to say next. If you've taught the course twenty years, maybe you don't have to try very hard, especially if you've made no changes.

Most teachers who teach the same courses year after year make changes to keep the course lively for themselves. So they're the

ones doing the thinking.

But I try to shut up and assign some brief, informal, ungraded writing such as I mentioned earlier. I might say, for example, "Go to it! You've been listening to me rattle on for twenty minutes. Write two questions on scratch paper that you need to get answered based on what you've heard. You've got two minutes to do this. If you can't come up with two, look to whoever's sitting on the left or right or behind you or in front of you, but, one way or another, come up with two questions. I'll collect them at the end. Put your name on it."

What if the questions aren't good ones?

The first time students do this, they're going to be a little nervous, and their questions may not be very good. But if you do it on a regular basis, the message you're getting across to the students, ultimately, is this: I'm expecting you to listen, and I'm expecting you to have something to show for your listening.

That, for me, is the single WIC technique that makes the most difference.

How do other teachers react to techniques like this?

I think making students active is the feature of a WIC pedagogy which consistently pleases the most teachers. They try it once. They're not real sure how it's going to work. They stay with it for two or three weeks, and at the end of that two or three weeks their students are interrupting them in the middle of the lecture and saying, "Can we stop for a minute? I want to write down a couple questions."

The teacher can use the questions students generate by saying, "Okay, read me the question you've written down," and suddenly the canned lecture becomes a spontaneous discussion.

That would seem to require quite a lot of flexibility on the part of the teacher. Is the

technique for everyone?

Some teachers don't like that question-answer dynamic. And in some courses, there isn't much room for discussion, frankly. But other teachers are hungry for discussion and for intellectual exchange with students. That's what they got into teaching for to. Somewhere along the line, dialogue with students got lost, and they're glad to find it again.

What attracted you, a poet, to writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) issues?

What attracted me to WAC in general and to WIC in particular is the fundamental importance of writing-to-learn, the type of writing that is at the heart of WIC. Writing for me has always been a way of trying to figure something out, a way of trying to play with something intellectually or emotionally or both, and I write poetry to learn.

Whether we talk about academic writing, personal writing, whatever kind of writing, the same basic impulse--writing to learn--prompts me across all genres.

I've heard you say that your work in the writing center led to your interest in WIC. Can you explain?

I became interested in the way writing assignments are designed. I worked as the writing center coordinator for five years and supervised writing assistants as they worked with other students who were attempting to finish various kinds of assignments made here at OSU. It was clear that some of those assignments were very carefully constructed and very knowledgeably constructed.

What do you mean by "knowledgeably"?

By "knowledgeably," I mean somebody knew something about how writers work and knew something about how long various kinds of writing activities might take, knew something

about the sophistication and/or ignorance of the students in the course and had taken all these things into consideration in assigning a writing activity that made sense.

But some of the assignments weren't that well designed. Some of them were vague, which meant that students had to essentially do some sort of sophisticated guessing game about what the teacher wanted.

How did these assignments go wrong?

Some assignments were simply impractical: Write a paper about Reagan's economics. Well, people write books about Reagan's economics, and the student's paper has got to be five pages, and it's got to have a good thesis, etc. That's an ambitious assignment, a very difficult writing activity. It sounds like it ought to be just a normal paper, but I suspect if you were to go to an economics journal, you would find very few well-written, five-page papers on Reagan's economics. Maybe you'd find papers on some aspect of Reagan's economics.

Maybe that's what the teacher meant: some aspect of Reagan's economics.

But that's not what the teacher said, and that's not what the students heard.

There's a tremendous capacity for confusion on the part of the teachers who are not really sure what they want students to do, first, and then what they want students to write, second, and what they want students to read, third. There's similar confusion on the students' part, and the writing center became the place where much of this confusion became evident.

What role can OSU's writing center play in WIC courses?

What writers crave is live response--it doesn't matter what kind of writer you're talking about--and that's what the writing center gives

you. The hardest thing about writing--and the reason for writing in the first place--is that the person who is going to do the reading isn't present to the writer.

The writer must try and anticipate the reader's objections and agreements, and so on. Those concerns determine what you say, where you say it, and how you say it. Writing is a tall order if you have to do it in isolation.

It isn't always helpful--is often downright unhelpful, at least in the long run--to evaluate, to critique, and to correct a writer's failings.

It seems that what most writers share about writing is the memory of the red pen. A simple response is often what writers really need--a description from the reader of what was clear in the writing and what wasn't.

It is important to help our students form peer-response groups in class or get peer-response in the writing center or both.

You mentioned revision. Don't the best writers get it right the first time?

I'm convinced that all writing benefits by a renewed attention on the part of the writer. You get to be smart more than once.

If you're lucky, maybe you're smart the first time when you write it down. But suppose you're somewhat unlucky; suppose you're only three quarters smart (if you want to be generous). [laughter]

Sometimes I feel like I'm about one third smart or less, but I do think I'm smart enough to recognize when I'm confused as I read over prose or as I see the reaction of a colleague who is kind enough to read my draft. "I don't get this." Okay, so I need to fix it. I need to make it better somehow.

Revision is nothing more than getting a chance to be smart however many times you want to revise. Pretty soon, the document is smarter than you're ever going to be.

A revised document is going to be more intelligent than an initial utterance--which is one reason why famous writers are often disappointments when met in person.

Do you have a culminating message for OSU faculty who use writing-to-learn techniques in their classrooms?

The best reason for faculty to use writing activities in the classroom doesn't have anything to do with WIC requirements. It has to do with what goes on between an individual faculty member and the students in a class. I think a lot of people get into teaching because what they really find enjoyable is the life that asks them to think daily. They're curious people. They like to think, they like to understand, and they like to realize there is always more to think about.

When teachers get students involved with thinking, get students to be partners in that process, the selfish payoff for the teacher is that the teacher thinks of things that would not have been thought of except for that class, except for that discussion, except for the intensity of give and take that occurred in the classroom. Writing activities are one way to make sure that there is some level of intellectual exchange, give and take, participation, group activity.

That doesn't have anything to do with administrative curriculum requirements. It has to do with enjoying your thinking, varying your thinking, exploring, being wrong sometimes and not minding. And writing activities seem to be the engine that drives this kind of experience in the classroom.

WINTER WIC SEMINAR

Wednesdays 3-5 pm

January 19-February 16

Chairs' nominations due by

Tuesday, January 11

Contact Sandra Mills on cemail

or at 737-2930

Seminar limit: 16

CHECKLIST FOR A STRONG WIC COURSE PROPOSAL

- The course syllabus clearly indicates that the course is writing intensive, that students will be using writing to learn the subject content, and that the course satisfies the WIC requirement for the major.
- The course objectives as stated in the syllabus include improving student writing.
- The syllabus indicates that students working on formal writing assignments will be guided through the writing process and will have opportunities to receive feedback and revise their drafts.
- The course proposal is specific about how the course will involve informal, ungraded writing-to-learn exercises throughout the term (for example, brief in-class freewriting or reading response journals).
- The course proposal includes the handouts (i.e. the written instructions) which students will receive for formal graded assignments. The assignments are clearly developed, indicating the purpose and task of the assignment, format, schedule of due dates, and criteria for evaluation.
- At least one formal graded assignment asks students to integrate information from more than one outside source.

Teaching With Writing is published by the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program, Center for Writing and Learning, Waldo 125, Corvallis, OR 97331-6404.