

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

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Pre/Views

By Vicki Collins, Director of the OSU
Writing Intensive Curriculum

In this issue of *Teaching with Writing*, Assistant Editor Allyn Amsk interviews Lisa Ede on approaches to using peer review of writing in classes across the disciplines. Lisa Ede is Professor of English and Director of the Center for Writing and Learning at OSU. She is also a nationally known scholar in Composition Studies, having won a number of the most prestigious awards in the field for her work. Be sure to read Lisa's suggestions for using peer review of writing in your classes.

I am frequently asked by faculty across the university what standards for writing they can realistically use in evaluating student work in lower and upper division courses. With this as a research question, I asked teams of students in Writing For Teachers (WR 411/511, Fall 1996) to choose one college of the university and survey a small sample of students and

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Successful Peer Review: An Interview With Lisa Ede

By Allyn Amsk

"The most negative stereotype of peer review from professors across the disciplines is that it's the blind leading the blind," says Lisa Ede, Professor of English and Director of the OSU Center for Writing and Learning. "If I as a professor think that that the quality of writing that my students are producing is generally not what I would hope it would be, then why would I possibly want to ask students to read the writing of other students?" Ede answers this question with the enthusiasm of an expert in the use of peer review.

With a Ph.D. from Ohio State University, Dr. Ede has been concerned with rhetoric throughout her distinguished career. This year she received the OSU Alumni Distinguished Professor Award. Her textbook on writing, *Work in Progress*, is in its third edition and throughout stresses the value of collaborative writing activities. Overcoming faculty members' initial perceptions of peer review is nothing new for Ede.

"I think it's easy for faculty members to forget, unless they are being reviewed for promotion and tenure, how uncomfortable and unpleasant it can be to find oneself being evaluated. One thing students do in response to that sense of discomfort is to try to resist teachers'

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Peer Review, Cont'd

assessments of them, particularly assessments that they see as potentially subjective. So if they take a math exam and they get 80 out of 100 points, they tend to say, OK, that's what I got. But where writing is involved, there is not the same empirical grounding for assessment. When students write essays and get their teacher's response, they often try to bracket these responses by saying that it is just Professor X's view of this, and Professor X just doesn't like how I write, and this is just an arbitrary assessment of my writing. When students engage in peer response activities, they are likely to hear comments similar to their professors', but these comments will be expressed very differently. So whereas a professor might say, 'This paper is poorly organized and lacks coherence,' a student might say, 'I really had trouble following this paper.' Peer review can show students that their professors' assessments aren't so subjective or arbitrary."

Ede reports that research in Educational Psychology shows a professor overhearing students discussing a paper might feel that students aren't as acute, analytical, or observant as the professor is in making comments. But because students feel more comfortable with peers, precisely because the peers are using language that students themselves use, and because they know they aren't being assessed with the same kind of impact in terms of a grade as when a teacher assesses them, they may be more able to really understand, respond to their peers comments, and revise accordingly.

Ede continues, "I think many faculty across the disciplines who use peer review spend virtually no time in class doing any kind of modeling. They

don't give students class time to do the peer review. I think students are realistic and reasonable in gauging how seriously a professor believes in a component of the class, by judging the extent to which the professor is willing to give class time to that activity." Ede doesn't necessarily devote a whole class period to modeling in an upper-division, 400 or 500 level writing class because she believes that students come to class with quite a lot of experience with peer review. "If a faculty member wants to have peer review play an important role, and particularly in a discipline that isn't English, in a class of history or psychology or electrical engineering where students don't have that experience, he or she might give at least a substantial part of one class period to modeling. The teacher can bring in one or more essays in response to the assignment, have students work in groups and report out, then have the class as a whole assess what were effective comments, what comments were less effective. That can be very important, because many students just don't understand what constitutes an effective peer response."

For Ede, students need to distinguish between teacher-type comments and reader-type comments.

"Students tend to either feel that they have to substitute for the teacher or they stand back and give up all effort at giving helpful responses and say, 'well I don't know, that sounds OK to me.'" To avoid this pattern, it's useful to talk about ways that a reader can respond that are "extremely helpful but feel formative rather than summative." Formative evaluations help writers develop their skills, while summative evaluations justify the grade on the paper.

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What Counts as Proof? Upcoming Speakers on The Nature of Evidence

A key to success for students in any course, and particularly in a writing intensive course, is understanding what counts as proof in the particular academic discipline. This year's OSU Horning Lecture Series, entitled "The Nature of Evidence," offers students and teachers across the university an opportunity to engage this topic with nationally known scholars in varied fields.

Winter term speakers include Mario Biagioli, Professor of History of Science at Harvard University, who will give a talk on Galileo on Monday, January 13, at 4 p.m. in Weniger #149. The title of the talk is "Stress in the Book of Nature: The Supplemental Logic of Galileo's Mathematical Realism." Biagioli is the author of *Galileo Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (U. of Chicago Press, 1993), which has been the center of considerable controversy in the field.

Also in Winter term, Professor Joan Richards, of the History Department at Brown University, will speak on "Persuasion: Places for Logic and Evidence in Early Victorian England," with attention to how intellectuals, especially mathematicians and natural philosophers, changed the way they crafted arguments in different historical contexts. This talk is on Thursday, February 27, at 4 p.m. in MU 206.

For Students: A New Course in Writing Across the Disciplines

Please pass the word to advisees and graduate students (especially TA's) that in the Spring term, a new course is being offered to expand students' knowledge of writing in the academic disciplines. WR 420/520, Writing Across the Disciplines, will introduce students to the theory and practice of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, with particular attention to writing-to-learn and writing in the disciplines, including the sociology of science writing. Students will become familiar with research in the field and conduct a study of writing in a discipline outside English. This course is appropriate for students in all majors and will include many topics addressed in WIC Faculty Seminars. For further information contact Vicki Collins at 737-3711 or collinsv@cla.orst.edu.

Pre/Views Cont'd

professors concerning the characteristics of excellent, average, and unacceptable writing at the 100 and 400 levels in that college. Despite the small sample, the surveys produced information on writing standards that will be of interest to faculty. In this issue, look for a summary of responses from the College of Engineering. Notice the differences between student and faculty criteria. As the research team noted, some students may not understand what their teachers are really looking for in their written work.

Don't miss the article about OSU's Grammar Hotline. I hope you will consider putting the email address on your syllabi!

Peer Review, Cont'd

"A teacher wanting to take peer review seriously, might begin a class period by talking about different types of responses, possibly even sharing Peter Elbow's suggestions for response with students, and talking with students about different ways of reading a text and responding to it; then, in that context, move the class to model peer response activities, and then possibly end the class by stepping back out of that activity—asking what have we learned from this, what kind of responding works best, what kind of responding was most helpful—and have the class as a whole write up guidelines for response."

Ede also advises that if the students have ever had peer response, if only in first-year writing, teachers can ask students to freewrite in response to the prompt, "When you're working on a writing project, what kind of responses have you found helpful, what kind of responses have you found unhelpful or even hurtful?" Students often say that helpful responses are responses that are specific, concrete. It's not helpful if someone is worried about hurting their feelings. "If you can use an activity like that to address the anxieties that students have that they are going to hurt a peer's feelings, say something that is unhelpful, that at least can clear the air."

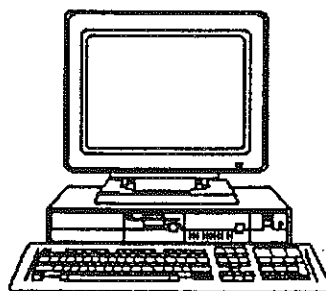
"One question that faculty members have to ask is how much they want to structure the peer response activity. That structuring can, if you imagine a continuum, go from, on the one hand, almost no structuring except for the kind of activities we've just talked about, to devising specific peer response forms for

specific writing activities. In other words, a faculty member in a class where students are responding to one another's lab reports, could devise a written form that would include specific questions for the student to address."

Ede notes that even when she hands out specific questions to her class, she asks her students to write down three questions they want their peer reviewer to consider. This method provides an alternative for faculty who want more control over the process but also want to allow their students some flexibility.

What are the rock-level advantages of peer review? Ede notes that "at the very least it sets up a structure for students that requires them to produce a draft before the deadline for the paper. You want students to take their writing seriously. They need to understand that writing the night before an assignment is due is less effective than taking time for revision."

For a WIC handout entitled "Peer-Response Strategies," contact Sandra Mills at millss@cla.orst.edu.



OSU Writing Center Announces Grammar Hotline

The Writing Center is extending its resources to on-campus and distance-learning students, to staff, to faculty, and to members of the community via an online Writing Hotline:

writingQ@mail.orst.edu.

The hotline works best for writers who lack the reference books to answer puzzling questions of usage, grammar, format, style, punctuation, and so on--and who do not need an immediate answer. One writer asked, "Does the period go inside the quotation marks or outside?" Another asked, "Is 'practicum' a word? If so, what is the definition? I can't find it in our department dictionary."

A member of the Writing Center staff will look up the answer and send back a documented reply as soon as possible. All questions asked so far have been answered within twenty-four hours and often within an hour or two.

For more information, contact Jon Olson, Writing Center Coordinator, olsonj@cla.orst.edu, 737-3712, or just send your questions to writingQ.

Fall WIC Seminar Enrolls Record Number of Faculty

This fall a record number of faculty participated in the Introductory WIC Seminar. Participants included Terri Lomax (Botany and Plant Pathology), William Earl (Speech Communication), Tom Hill (Animal Science), David Eiseman (Music), Ray Tricker and Donna Chapeau (Public Health), David McMurray (Anthropology), Gary Field (Political Science), Patti Sakurai and Kurt Peters (Ethnic Studies), Chris Southers (Education), David Rogge and Sheryl

Get online answers to
brief writing questions at
writingQ@mail.orst.edu

Stuart (Civil Engineering), Sally Bowman and Rachel Whaley (Sociology), and Toshimi Minoura (Computer Science).

Linda Spain, Chair of English and Foreign Languages at Linn-Benton Community College, and Lynn Trempe, a Math professor at LBCC, also participated in the seminar. LBCC is considering faculty development seminars on writing across the curriculum. Participation by these LB professors in the OSU faculty seminar will help community college faculty understand the nature and demands of Writing Intensive courses that await their students who continue their studies at OSU.

About *Teaching With Writing*

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 the WIC courses ranges from radiation safety (for Nuclear Engineering majors) to golf course design (a Horticulture option).

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, including the use of borrowed information.

- *Students complete at least 5000 words of writing, of which at least 2000 words are in polished, formal assignments.

- *Students are guided through the whole writing process, receive feedback on drafts, and have opportunities to revise.

For complete information on WIC guidelines, contact Vicki Collins by email at collinsv@cla.orst.edu or consult the OSU Curricular Procedures Handbook.

Writing Criteria in the College of Engineering

This fall, nineteen students and eight professors in the OSU College of Engineering were surveyed to discover what characteristics students and teachers associate with excellent, average, and unacceptable student writing at various course levels in the College. The study was conducted as a course project in WR 411/511 by Kara Cade (04 English), Jodi Dodd (04 English), and Laura Lundy (05 Eng. Ed.).

From the viewpoint of those teaching Writing Intensive courses, it is interesting to note similarities and differences between student and faculty criteria for excellent writing at each academic level. At the 100 level, while professors say

they are merely looking for good performance in grammar (most mentioned), organization, and content, students imagine the criteria for excellence to be more rigorous, including creativity, good "flow," and "flawless" grammar.

And while Engineering professors consider accurate information essential, students did not mention it as a component of good writing. It would also be interesting to know what 100 level Engineering majors mean by "creativity," a quality of writing highly valued by students but not mentioned by professors, even at the 400 level.

The researchers noted that nearly all respondents mentioned "grammar" as

What are the characteristics of excellent, average, and unacceptable writing?

Characteristics are listed from the most to least frequently mentioned

Student Responses

Excellent Writing

Flawless grammar
Creative ideas
Good flow and readability
Good sentence structure
Strong, developed thesis
Concise

Average Writing

Fair grammar (minor problems)
Fair clarity
Fair organization
Fair sentence structure
Very little creativity

Unacceptable Writing

Poor grammar
Poor organization
Poor sentence structure
Not focussed on the assignment
Lacking clarity
Poor appearance
Lacking creativity
Poor effort

100/200 Level

Professor Responses

Excellent Writing

Good grammar
Good organization
Accurate and good information

Average Writing

Fair grammar
Fair organization
Good citations

Unacceptable Writing

Poor grammar
Poor sentence structure
Poor word choice
Absence of conciseness

a concern at every level. Yet, the report notes, students and teachers alike were vague about what "grammar" includes. For some, grammar was something different from "good punctuation" and "good usage." For others it appeared to be an umbrella term including even spelling.

This study raises a number of interesting questions about student writers and the teaching of writing to engineers. A few of these are:

- How and when are students taught what constitutes "good writing" in engineering?

- How can teachers make clearer to students that accurate information is part

of good writing in engineering?

- What are "good citations" in engineering?

- What counts as proof for engineers? What doesn't?

- What specific grammatical errors do teachers see most frequently or find most troublesome?

- How might students be helped to understand the errors and correct them in their own writing?

Note from the WIC Director: Would any professors in the College of Engineering be interested in a wide-ranging discussion of these survey results with me and the student researchers during winter term? If so, email me at collinsv@cla.orst.edu.

Student Responses 300/400 Level Professor Responses

Excellent Writing

Excellent grammar
Good flow and readability
Good organization
Creativity
Word choice/variety
Concise and clear
Good appearance
Proper citations

Average Writing

Fair grammar (minor problems)
Fair clarity
Adequate thesis development
Fair organization
Lacking in appearance or creativity

Unacceptable Writing

Poor grammar
Unclear thesis or lack of thesis
Poor sentence structure
Poor organization
Poor effort
Plagiarism

Excellent Writing

Good organization
Good clarity
Strong, developed thesis
Excellent grammar
Excellent conciseness
Good appearance
Good sentence structure
Good flow
Thorough citations
Accuracy of technical information

Average Writing

Adequate thesis development
Fair grammar (minor problems)
Writing characteristics at fair level

Unacceptable Writing

Poor grammar
Undeveloped thesis
Lacking clarity
Poor word choice (redundant)
Inappropriate use of subjectivity
Lacking references
Inaccurate information

**Call For Applications
Advanced WIC Seminar
Winter Term 1997**

3 TO 5 P.M. WEDNESDAYS BEGINNING JANUARY 22, 1997

DATES INCLUDE JAN. 22, 29, FEB. 12, 19, 26

Honorarium upon completion of seminar requirements

Topics will include: What's working in WIC courses and what's not? More writing-to-learn. Managing collaborative writing projects. Non-native speakers in WIC classes. And more!

Faculty who completed the introductory WIC seminar prior to Fall 1996 and have tried WIC approaches in their classes are eligible. Request nomination by your chair. Chairs should send nominations to millss@CLA.orst.edu.

Deadline for nominations: Friday, January 17, 1997

1997 WIC Department Development Grants: Call for Proposals

Imagine this: A large land grant university where faculty in every department have identified the writing skills and experiences needed by their students, decided which writing skills and experiences are appropriate for each course level in the curriculum, and provided faculty development to help teachers achieve these goals in student writing. WIC Department Development Grants can help make this vision a reality at Oregon State.

The Writing Intensive Curriculum Program is now accepting proposals for WIC Grants for 1997. Special consideration will be given to grant applications

which address some or all of the departmental goals mentioned above. Proposals may also focus on projects which will generally increase and improve the use of writing in undergraduate courses, encourage the use of writing at all levels of curriculum, and/or improve WIC course offerings. Grants range from \$50 to \$2,500, with preference going to grants proposed by faculty with WIC seminar training. Requests for Proposals are available from Sandra Mills at 7-2930 or millss@cla.orst.edu. Proposals are due in the WIC office 123 Waldo, by February 15, 1997.