

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

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Pre/Views

By Vicki Collins, WIC Director

As teachers of fall term Writing Intensive Curriculum (WIC) courses begin to plan syllabi, it helps to remember that students need information about what a WIC course involves. Although every undergraduate at OSU is required to take at least one WIC course in the major, many students do not realize that all WIC courses across the university share certain common requirements, which are listed on page 4 in the box "About Teaching With Writing."

Listing these WIC requirements on the syllabus of all WIC classes may help students remember that improving writing is a goal of the course and also reduce student resistance to seemingly rigorous writing demands.

Faculty who have not yet taken the WIC Faculty Seminar are reminded that the next introductory seminar begins in October and meets on five Wednesday afternoons from 3 to 5 p.m. Interested faculty can contact me via email (Collinsv@cla.orst.edu). Enrollment will

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Biomechanist Gerry Smith Jumps into Writing-to-Learn

By Carol Leitschuh (Ph.D., EXSS)

Visitors to the Web site at <http://www.orst.edu/Dept/HHP/EXSS/323/> can see Dr. Gerry Smith's excitement for writing pulsing and jumping and graphing across their computer screen. Smith's Web page is an automated depiction of this Oregon State professor of Exercise and Sports Science taking a single jump while simultaneously creating a graph of the jump's force. Through a grant from OSU, Smith received release time to create a Web page for student writing assignments.

Students in Biomechanics (EXSS 323) regularly work through problems and answer questions using email. Smith designs the questions to help students focus on key concepts and organize their resources for understanding those concepts. Students are asked to describe what was not clear for them in lecture and what they could do to clarify their own understanding. Nongraded assignments like this not only gauge student learning but also enable the instructor to provide needed assistance. Student emails demonstrate that students do know what they can do to make things clearer for themselves and thus take responsibility for their own learning.

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Gerry Smith says that his first attempts to have students use email to "re-visit" the material presented in class met with loud protests from students. After each lecture they were to email him a brief response to a question. Because students were already engaged in Web assignments for the course lab, this extra email assignment pushed them over the brink. By mid-term, all agreed that a weekly response was more satisfactory.

Informal writing-to-learn also works well in his classes, according to Smith. After presenting a topic area in lecture, Smith often asks students to write for three or four minutes about something related to the topic. The informal writings then become part of the class discussion. In undergraduate courses, brief in-class writings are used to take attendance and to gauge where students are with the material.

As for his expectations of students writing in the field of biomechanics, Smith believes the Web responses, lab writeups, and citation formats prepare students for jobs in the field. They will need to write concise technical reports as well as for the popular press. His formal assignments are designed to "force the student to go back to work on the main ideas of the course, to put ideas into long term memory."

Gerry Smith has participated in both the introductory and advanced WIC Faculty Seminars, as well as a departmental retreat on writing funded by a WIC Department Development Grant. A firm believer in teaching with writing, Smith says of his latest WIC seminar during Winter Term, "These discussions have gotten me excited about teaching all over again."

When Online Peer Review Goes Awry

*Excerpted from an email message from
Howard Meyer (Animal Science)*

My 400-level course (not a WIC) requires that each student write 3 research reports, each from a scientific journal article of their choosing but pertaining to one of a short list of topics provided for each of the three assignments. I wanted each student to receive peer reviews from two classmates and, in turn, review the papers of two others. I thought that email would be a great way to transmit the papers and receive comments, etc. and set up a list whereby each student would send their first paper to the first and second names following theirs on the list, second paper to the third and fourth names, etc. That way they were always seeing new writing styles and having new reviewers comment on their own papers. So far, so good...

When we tried to implement the system, it completely fell apart. I wanted reviewers' comments inserted into the drafts so they would be most useful; however, the word processor documents were attached to the email messages, and attachments can't be edited. I found that insertions could be edited, so made that adjustment. Then had problems that different email systems couldn't talk to each other (also that word processor files sent as TEXT files lost all punctuation, etc.) So...we gave every student (about 35) a separate cemail account—they could still communicate from remote sites via internet. More snags happened...A could talk to B and C but B could only talk to A and not C and....

Anyway, the mechanics over-

Meyer continued from page 2

whelmed us, students got upset, etc. Five of the students wished to continue exchanging via email (and got along fine), the rest went to physical exchange of papers, which created problems whenever someone missed either the Monday exchange of drafts or Wednesday return of comments. This being a pretty difficult course anyway, the email glitch was one more thing that turned students off.

This term I have 65 students (different course) and have just purchased a set of mail boxes (sort of portable) to label and use for the exchanges. Each student will do two papers, each paper to be reviewed by two different peers.

When Online Peer Review Works, Thanks to Special Software

Excerpted from an email message from Ty Inoue, English

I've come across some questions and issues that I believe would prove profitable for your seminar, mainly because they deal with another kind of technology in the writing classroom. (I believe these issues also translate into any WIC class).

You identify several "goals" and questions a WIC instructor should consider in your WIC Newsletter [Winter 1997], but you focus on email as the primary writing technology. The software I use, CommonSpace, is a word processing/commenting program designed to allow students to write and revise essays as well as comment on each other's papers in a parallel fashion, using columns and workspaces. I haven't used the network capabilities yet, but can create

"chat" spaces in which groups of students in a lab setting engage in directed written discussions. I've found surprises with this program, logistical ones, ones concerning assumptions students have about computers in the classroom, and more importantly issues concerning the way I see my students approaching writing done on a computer.

Here are some of those issues:

- word count instead of page limit
- more errors in their writing
- a tendency to conceive writing tasks in a slightly different way (e.g. higher occurrence of lack of focus)
- student resistance to a computer requirement for a class
- a different and often higher engagement in peer responses.

(For more information about CommonSpace, contact Ty Inoue at inouet@cla.orst.edu)

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be by nomination of department chairs in September.

Six WIC Seminar alumni are among the recipients of the WIC Department Development Grants for 1997. Congratulations to Sunil Khanna and David McMurray (Anthropology), Kurt Peters (Ethnic Studies), Kathryn Higley and Jack Higginbotham (Nuclear Engineering), and Marcella Becker and Jim Foster (Political Science). While the new Department of Ethnic Studies is using grant money for initial design of WIC courses, the other three projects focus on a departmental approach to writing in the discipline and development of a field-specific writing guide for students.

WIC Grants Announced

The following departments have been awarded WIC Department Development Grants this spring.

Department of Anthropology
Sunil Khanna and David McMurray,
Proposers

Goal: To follow up the development of a student writing guide by holding a departmental retreat focused on experiences of department members using writing in Anthropology courses.

Department of Ethnic Studies
Kurt Peters, Proposer

Goal: To integrate WIC criteria into appropriate Ethnic Studies courses, design WIC syllabi and writing assignments, and orient new Ethnic Studies faculty to WIC expectations.

Department of Nuclear Engineering, Kathryn Higley and Jack Higginbotham, Proposers

Goal: To develop and publish a booklet of writing guidelines and examples for students in the Department of Nuclear Engineering. The guide will include a concise summary of departmental expectations for writing at each level in the program as well as examples of different types of writing at each level.

Department of Political Science
Marcella Becker and Jim Foster,
Proposers

Goals: To facilitate development of new pedagogy for teaching writing throughout the Political Science curriculum and to modify existing teaching practices by developing a departmental student writing guide. Funding is provided

for two department retreats, first, to discuss the writing skills needed by Political Science students, and second, to finalize the guide and facilitate its use by faculty and students.

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.

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