TEACHING WITH WRITING

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

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Pre/Views:
Thesis Writing in Community
By Vicki Tolar Burton

When I was a doctoral student working on my dissertation, I found myself waiting for an elevator with a senior faculty member in my department. She asked how my project was progressing. I gave the usual slightly positive but evasive answer, betraying my frustration that doing really good archival research is a slow process. She said, "Just remember, Vicki, there are two kinds of dissertations: excellent ones and finished ones. You want a finished one."

Another professor told me that her father, a Dean of Arts and Sciences at a midwestern university, gave her a sign to put over her desk while she wrote her dissertation: with a Nike swoosh, the sign said "JUST DO IT!"

These two women were not suggesting that I cut corners or in any way diminish the quality of my project. But they were both warning of the quicksand of the never-completed dissertation and urging me to keep my end goal in sight.

What is the best writing process for a thesis or dissertation? Research on how students write suggests that writing processes differ, and what works for one writer may not work for another. What worked for a thesis director when he or she was writing the thesis may (or may not) work for that person's student. In the WIC seminars, faculty discussions of under-

EXSS WIC Students Publish "Authentic Writing"
By Mark Gardner

One of the many goals of the WIC curriculum is to help students transition from classroom writing to professional communication--that is, from merely demonstrating knowledge to actually applying skills based upon a foundation of study. In the college of Health and Human Performance, one model of how this is being accomplished has emerged in Dr. Brad Cardinal's "Critical Issues and Analysis in Exercise and Sport Science" WIC course.

Fundamental to Cardinal's WIC course is an understanding of what kinds of writing actually occur in the field which his students are studying to enter. To acquaint his students with this genre of writing, which he refers to as "authentic writing" in the EXSS field, Cardinal sets the term goal in his syllabus that one final product of the course will be a publishable article. In order to arrive at such a product, the students must choose their potential outlet for publication, which may range from scholarly journals to local newspapers.

Dr. Cardinal not only asked for publishable work, but his students, in fact, have been getting published.

One woman had an article published in the "Fit Tuesday" section of the Corvallis *Gazette-Times*.

Two more students were published (winning out over Ph.D. students and university professors) by contributing to an "Issues" section in *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*.

Another student published a major article in *Coach and Athletic Director*--which resulted in a contract for a second article, as well as the seeds for his Masters study project in the development of instruments for the assessment of coaching and athletic training programs.

In the three terms Cardinal has taught this course, ten percent of his students have been published. Several other students have submitted articles to professional journals and newspapers (the course requirement is a "publishable article," the actual publication of the work is at the prerogative of the student). Like publications in any field, however,

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graduate writing often spill over into questions about theses.

The mentoring relationship between a thesis director and writer is crucial to any successful project. Beyond this collaboration, how much help should a student get and from whom? Is the thesis a gauntlet the student must run alone in order to prove her academic worthiness? Can students benefit from being in community with other writers? If an otherwise able student seems stuck in writing the thesis, unable to "just do it," should the academy provide writing support or simply deem that student unacceptable?

I unintentionally sparked an online debate around these questions when I posted an email announcement to graduate advisors concerning a summer school course I plan to offer:

Summer Term 2001
WR 599 Dissertation/Thesis Writing
Workshop and Retreat (3 credits)

In a retreat setting away from Corvallis, students will work from Sunday night to Friday afternoon on the writing of their thesis or dissertation and meet daily with the professor about their writing. Students will also work as a group on writing problems such as writer's block, organization difficulties, time management, improving clarity, developing ideas, and other challenges of long projects. Enrollment limited to 12. In addition to tuition, student will pay for lodging and meals for five days (cost not yet determined but range is approximately $150 to $250 per person depending on facility available).

"Do you think any graduate students in your department would be interested in [this] opportunity to jumpstart their dissertation or thesis?" I asked the advisors.

My assumptions in offering the course are that some graduate students in the process of writing the thesis or dissertation might benefit from time away from normal routines to focus intensely on the project, to think deeply, and to write. Their thinking might be clarified by articulating their ideas to a new audience and sharing

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Special Event:
"Literacy, Authority, and Knowledge-Making"
An invited lecture by
Jackie Jones Royster
Professor of English and Associate Dean for
Research and Faculty Development
College of Humanities, Ohio State University
Monday, April 30, 7:30 p.m., MU 206

*Presented by the CLA Dean's Office and the CLA Center
for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Research*

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their doubts, frustrations, and enthusiasms with a community of other writers. Some might need help with writing problems beyond content development such as organization, clarity, even writer's block, help that I can provide.

The ensuing online discussion among graduate advisors about student writing has been lively. A number of advisors think the course is a great idea. Some have promised to support students financially. Other faculty spoke with concern about students who would be unable to attend. Is it fair to offer a course that people with jobs and families or limited resources cannot take? My view is that it would be unfair to require such a course, but reasonable to make it available. Once we are beyond the pilot stage, perhaps there may be funding for students with limited resources.

Part of the debate gets at the heart of how we see writing. Some graduate advisors oppose the kind of support I am offering. A note posted from the College of Agriculture says: "If students need this kind of pampered environment to write the thesis they do not deserve to get a graduate degree. We want graduates who are self motivated, can digest data, write creatively and work independently. And be able to figure out what they need to do to get the writing done." He also expressed a fear that many graduate students "never learn the work ethic and independent thinking that is needed to become proficient at analyzing and interpreting data, and creative writing to be a real professional."

Others disagree. An English professor wrote that he was surprised by the previous professor's "hostility to the notion that informed conversation, as well as self-direction, can strengthen writing. I'd like to think that we're committed, not only to awakening intelligent industry in our students, but also to helping them produce the best work they can. Our discursive skills require communal maintenance, not just solitary labor. At the very least, Professor ____ is mistaken to suppose that his way of composing should work for everyone. If students want to take this course, then let them."

In a similar vein, a colleague from History responded: "In my experience, too, writing is not just about bullheading your way through data. It's also about collaboration, refining arguments, getting excited once again about your topic by sharing it with others and getting insights from hearing others share their work…. Frankly, I would challenge any of us to think about whether we do our best, most exciting, most influential work in isolation. It is a shame when a lifetime of opportunities to change our disciplines by doing our BEST work is tossed aside for the sake of a kind of pseudo-moral idea that s/he writes best who writes alone."

A professor in the Department of Food Science and Technology wrote about the special nature of the

competition is strong, so Cardinal's students have also learned what he describes as "the valuable experience" of learning about rejection as a part of the process of getting published.

Across the university, the goal of WIC is not necessarily to produce volumes of publishable work, but rather to elevate students to a level of communication competence within their given field. For Cardinal, the authentic writing approach has worked, and skimming the main points of Cardinal's approach makes it clear that the published products of his students are simply a testament to the fact that EXSS WIC students are learning how to write effectively as professionals in their field. Some main points of Cardinal's course include:

• The course is structured around 14 writing assignments, which build upon one another toward the final article. These are all turned in by the student on a schedule throughout the term--thus, as Cardinal says, there is always a "deadline looming" which helps limit procrastination.

• The concept of producing a "publishable article," though intimidating to some, is the goal of the course. Students are encouraged to select a venue for potential publication based upon their own interests within the field--and then develop a rhetorical stance appropriate for their given venue and audience.

• In-class writings are also used, and Cardinal cites the loop-writing technique he learned from the WIC seminar as a particular favorite of his students. Such writings promote an understanding of the course materials and lectures and also stimulate idea development for the various stages of the major project. One topic for in-class freewriting has been a "blueprint for success," where students identify their current progress and devise the next three actions they must take to advance themselves in their project. In-class writings serve to help students reflect on their own experiences,

and are also used at times to work out some of the nuts and bolts of grammar and composition.

• The third or fourth week of the term, the focus turns to research skills. The class either heads off to the Valley Library or sets up individual office hour appointments to learn effective research techniques.

• The emphasis on authentic writing is not limited to major articles: students also learn how to prepare cover letters, resumes, and applications appropriate to their field.

• Frequent student/instructor contact is central to Cardinal's approach. Cardinal encourages students to work with him so that he can help to guide them in the right direction, whether it is to clarify the purpose of the paper or to simply track the progress of the student work. This interaction, says Cardinal, "is the most useful thing I do."

• To help students transition from undergraduate writer to professional communicator, Cardinal also shares his own work--even the articles and papers he himself has composed in his career. Students then see the comments given to him, and the feedback he receives from a peer-review by his professional colleagues. Professional peer review is then imitated within the classroom, where classmates review each others' work and make suggestions.

• Examples of past student writing are also used to help model for students what is possible. Not only does this demonstrate to students that they can in fact be published, but it also illuminates the relevance of their projects to their field--and that their work in this course may be a springboard to further studies.

Though the demands of professional writing vary from discipline to discipline, the EXSS 481 course structure offers a strong example of how a WIC course can be designed around the communication demands of a given field. What is important in any WIC course is a goal not far from what Dr. Brad Cardinal has helped to facilitate: an awareness of the "transition to professional life" necessary to produce highly competent and exceedingly marketable graduates in the field of exercise and sport science.

Loop Writing helps students reflect upon what they have learned and narrow their focus for research:

Step 1: Begin with a short free-write where students write as much information as they can about their topic.

Step 2: Have students read over their freewrite and then write a single sentence which reflects the most important idea in the original freewrite.

Step 3: Use this new sentence as a starting point for another, more directed freewrite.

Step 4: Repeat steps 2 and 3 for a total of three freewrites--three cycles should be enough to help students produce and process information to achieve increased focus.

Blueprints for Success help students assess their own progress toward completing a major writing project. The two basic elements of a blueprint for success are:

• An assessment of the current progress of the project, i.e., drafts completed or research information compiled.

• A detailed description of the next three steps necessary in the writing process (these steps need not culminate in the completion of the paper, since blueprinting is an exercise which can be repeated at various stages in the process).

Source: Bullock, Richard. *The St. Martin's Manual for Writing in the Disciplines.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 26-36.

advisor/student relationship: "I prefer to work with them on their writing ... writing the manuscript that will become part of a thesis as joint faculty-student effort is a great mentoring opportunity that goes far beyond writing. But ... on occasions the writing of a student has been so poor that it got in the way of the mentoring."

Another professor from the College of Health and Human Performance questioned this type of support for writers, based on her frustration with graduate students who write poorly. "After directing several dissertation and thesis students over the past few years, it occurs to me that we would be better utilizing scarce resources if we spent our time on remedial WRITING skills.....For example, how do you write a complete sentence....what about things like transitions, coherence, structure, grammar, making a reasoned argument with appropriate supporting documentation- in a logical manner?....We assume that because someone is in graduate school that they have had the benefit of a rigorous and appropriate training in utilizing the written word…. Where can you send someone who doesn't have essential writing skills??"

The answer is that students can take undergraduate writing courses (as they would do in science if their backgrounds there were inadequate) and seek help with specific problems in the Writing Center. The Workshop/Retreat will **not** be a week devoted to grammar.

The overall response was positive. I do not know if Writing 599 will attract the number of students necessary to make it financially viable. But I am grateful for the online discussion of the writing process among my colleagues across the university and the ways in which they have both challenged my assumptions and supported them. The Writing Intensive program for undergraduates is always strengthened by thoughtful faculty exchanges about writing.

I am working to reduce the cost of the summer course for students. I hope that 12 to 15 students will want to join me on the Oregon Coast in September for five days of thinking, writing, and conversation about writing. We will stay in student apartments at the Hatfield Marine Science Center on the Oregon Coast, work in the OSU library there, and gather as a community of writers around food and rough drafts, sunrises and sunsets. And from this pilot project we will learn more about what kinds of support writers of theses and dissertations need.

FindSame.com: An Internet Tool for Finding Plagiarism

We all want to be fair to our students. As Kent Schneider points out in a recent issue of *The Teaching Professor*, "When plagiarism goes undetected in a class, this goal [of fairness] is undermined…Though peer pressure silences the honest, students are often aware of the deceit and hope the cheaters will be caught. This places enormous pressure on the instructor to identify plagiarism when grading papers."

Schneider recommends using FindSame.com, a free internet tool that is a service of Digital Integrity. It searches by content rather than keywords. The instructor types a suspicious passage into the textbox and FindSame provides links to websites that match the text. Because matching texts appear in color, it is easy to see if the passages are the same. Though FindSame.com does not have access to sites that block robots, it can help with many instances of possible plagiarism.

Several WIC Eating-to-Learn Seminars to be offered during Spring Term, noon to one, Waldo 121.

April 13   e-WIC
Bill Winner explains his strategies for taking ENSC 479 Environmental Case Studies entirely online.

May 18   Assessing-to-Learn: Lessons from the Baccalaureate Core Committee's Review of 90 WIC Courses

More dates and topics will be announced in April.