
**Plymouth State College
Journal on
Writing Across the Curriculum**

Volume 11

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Plymouth State College Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum

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Reflections on WAC

Tributes to Sally Boland

Robert Miller

At its December 1999 meeting, the WAC Editorial Board decided that this year's issue of the WAC Journal would be dedicated to Sally Boland. It was an easy decision. Without Sally there may never have been a WAC program at Plymouth: she was its founder and a consistent source of inspiration to all of us who have worked to make the program successful.

In the early 1980's Sally Boland was a member of the ad hoc committee exploring what the Plymouth faculty wanted General Education to do for our students. One goal that clearly emerged was to make them better writers. Sally had heard about a new national movement in the teaching of writing: Writing Across the Curriculum. She persuaded the committee that writing should be a component of any general education course, and that the basic composition course that students take through the English Department should be followed by a writing course in which they learn the discipline-specific writing of their major. With implementation of those changes came the need to support faculty across the disciplines who would

now be called upon to assign more student writing, and the WAC program was born.

We have solicited tributes to Sally from several colleagues and students. Mary-Lou Hinman, commenting on Sally's role in the founding of the program, captures her extraordinary ability to translate a new idea into action and inspire others to join the initiative. Bob Fitzpatrick recalls the highly successful "Make'em Sweat and Learn" workshop series that Sally coordinated the year she was interim chair of the WAC Task Force. Sarah Miller, a student in one of Sally's last Composition classes, remembers a writing teacher who skillfully challenged her to overcome her "writing ego" and develop further as a writer. Meg Petersen reflects on her colleague as a source of inspiration for students and faculty alike. Finally, in a dialogue, which captures Sally's own playful creativity, Roy Andrews and Tony Koschmann, another of Sally's Composition students, recall Sally's ability to facilitate good writing and good thinking.

These warm tributes make clear that our memories of Sally Boland are likely to inspire our efforts for many years to come.



Sally Boland and the Origins of WAC

by Mary-Lou Hinman

During the fall of 1985, Sally Boland approached me with a request: "Mary-Lou, would you be willing to serve on a Task Force studying Writing Across the Curriculum?"

"Sure," I said, even though I knew nothing about the Writing

Across the Curriculum movement, then in its infancy. I was a first year FIR, however, and couldn't say "no" to any request, especially one from an admired English Department colleague.

At the first meeting of the Task Force, I was elected Chair, obviously because I was a member of the English Department. (At that stage we all still had the misguided notion that the English Department was responsible for the quality of writing on the campus.) It certainly wasn't because I knew anything about WAC or about the college community outside my own department. I was an ignorant woman.

Left to my own devices, I'm not sure WAC would ever have developed at Plymouth. But Sally Boland did what was second nature to her—gave me the support I needed, then faded to the background. She delivered a stack of journals to my office, which contained early articles outlining WAC principles and pedagogy. Those articles and their bibliographies were a starting place. From there, the Task Force read and researched further and finally became conversant with WAC theory. We were enthusiastic. This was not another committee assignment; it was a way to make a tangible difference in how our students learned and wrote.

Sally had carried out another important piece of research before the Task Force was formed. Because the new General Education Program mandated writing intensive courses in every discipline, she knew we would have to train faculty to teach those classes. She had located a possible practical theorist to offer a model faculty training writing workshop. She gave me the name of Toby Fulwiler, who had recently moved from Michigan Technological University to the University of Vermont. She had even contacted him in advance to make sure his workshop would accomplish what we required. My only role was to organize the three-day workshop and convince the then Dean of the College that Toby Fulwiler was worth what he charged.

During the workshop, I was a wreck. We had convinced some fairly high-powered faculty to join us, and Fulwiler's approach seemed so simple, so straightforward. Instead of lecturing, he had

us all write—over and over again. My journal from that first workshop is full of anxiety laden entries that ask, “What are they thinking? How is this going?” I shouldn’t have worried. At the end of the three days, the participants were hooked. They had learned new teaching techniques, and they loved the contact with colleagues from different departments. They volunteered to go to President Farrell and demand support for a program they thought could positively influence teaching at Plymouth.

On the final day when the workshop disbanded, Sally asked me to have lunch with her. “Where do we go from here?” she asked. I wasn’t sure. We began to bat around possibilities. Certainly, we would have to support faculty as they tried new techniques. Perhaps we could offer some “follow-up sessions.” We should advertise successes when they happened. What about some “brown bag” talks by WAC enthusiasts? The Task Force needed a budget. Let’s see; how much would we need to support two faculty training workshops? How about extra help for the Writing Laboratory (later the Reading/Writing Center)?

All the time we talked, Sally wrote notes on a paper napkin. By the end of lunch, the next year of WAC activities had been outlined and a tentative budget designed. Sally handed me the napkin as we left the restaurant, and then she backed away.

From time to time when I had a special problem to solve, I would approach Sally. Once I remember needing new presenters for a faculty training workshop. She had heard about an interesting project David Zehr had incorporated into one of his psychology classes. But then, Sally always knew what was going on at Plymouth, who the innovators were, who had devised interesting writing assignments. She was a walking reference.

Two or three years later when PSC was named a “Best Buy” by Barron’s for two years running, one of the key elements mentioned was Plymouth’s Writing Across the Curriculum program. Of course, the WAC Task Force was pleased. We had watched 60% of the faculty attend training workshops. When we presented at conferences, we discovered how far ahead of other institutions we were

in terms of faculty commitment. We knew the program at PSC was special. *I* knew that Sally Boland was directly responsible for that success.



Sally Boland and the “Make ‘em Sweat and Learn” WAC Workshops

by Robert E. Fitzpatrick

It was typical of Sally to come up with a program that would provide the maximum benefit for the energy expended. And she was certainly not reticent about expending energy.

In January of 1992, it was my pleasure, along with Roy Andrews, Robert Miller, and Dick Chisholm, to join Sally in planning a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) workshop. I can hear Sally’s recommendation for a title for the workshop, “Make ‘em Sweat and Learn.” She said this with a mock snarl as if she were trying to imply that she intended to be rough on the students. Well, Sally may have been a demanding professor, but she was extremely considerate of her students. She knew what her students were capable of, and she knew how to coax most, if not all, of their potential out of them. But Sally really being mean? No. Impossible. That’s what made the title so funny for the rest of us.

Her title was really typical of her personality. While nearly anyone else who was trying to be mean, or even just funny for that matter, would have stopped at “Make ‘em Sweat,” Sally had to add, almost apologetically, “and Learn.” Sincerity, concern, *and* a sense of humor.

The program was divided into four sessions: Creating Assign-

ments, Research Instruction, Writing Instruction, and Grading and Evaluation. That didn't sound too bad to me, but the approach she encouraged...! We would have to model the whole process. We even had to write the paper. Well, as Patricia Breivik states in her book, *Planning the Library Instruction Program*, a good assignment requires six elements: it should be real or at least imitate reality; it should require the active involvement of the learner; it should be individualized; it should provide for a variety of learning experiences; it should be up-to-date; and, finally, it should be non-threatening. How could we have asked participants to do something we were reluctant to do ourselves? But then, most faculty probably wouldn't give students assignments they hadn't tried out themselves.

We started with what Sally called an assignment from hell — “Was Hitler a Maniac?” — an example of a typically bad assignment that might seem clear to the professor but is meaningless to the student. It was the kind of vague assignment that results in unhappiness on both sides of the podium. Over the course of the four weeks we managed to improve the assignment so that it read: “Examine the presentation of Hitler in the American press. How is he presented as a leader? What are the most significant events of the time period your group is covering? Summarize your presentation with a description of how you feel the American people viewed Hitler at the time.” The workshop guided us through creation of the assignment to the final product. We even wrote that paper together.

Our stated goals were to “create a workshop that would give faculty hands-on experience in developing the skills that make classroom writing productive and pleasurable for both students and faculty, stimulate faculty conversation on using writing to enhance teaching and learning, and give faculty first-hand experience with the difficulties and rewards of collaborative work.” Okay, these were the stated goals, but Sally's real goals were all of these and more.

The unstated goals included involving all possible activities and resources, such as the library, the writing center, faculty with real assignments, the *WAC Journal* editorial board, the venerable pot-luck supper, and even a small amount of wine and cheese, and

to combine them all in order to get the largest group of people possible involved in a cooperative activity that would really help students. To this mix she added her own enthusiasm, determination, and sense of humor.

The synergistic result was more than we could have hoped for or expected. The workshop, thanks to Sally, was not about what we were doing wrong with our assignments, but rather let's take an honest look at writing assignments and see what might make them more understandable as learning experiences – for both the professors and the students.

And so, we sweated, *and* we learned. We also laughed a lot.



Sally Boland as Writing Teacher

by Sarah Miller

As a first-year student entering my Composition class for the first time, I was energized. I felt that I would not only polish up my writing, but that I would amaze the professor with my fluency, grammar, and style. The first assignment was perfect. It was a personal essay, and if there was one style of essay that I was good at, it was the personal essay. I felt so good about the paper when I finished it. It was my first paper ever written for a college class. I handed it in knowing that I would get an A. The professor expressed her amazement at my work by giving me a C. I couldn't believe that she had given me a C. Did she know how long I had worked on that paper? Did she know how much that paper meant to me? Did she know

that I rarely got C's on anything?

So I rewrote the paper and went to talk with this professor, this Sally Boland. My first meeting with Professor Sally Boland was interesting. She was rather short, shorter than I was, which was rare. She always had dimples on her face, just at the corners of her smile. Her eyes were wide and glowing and her cheeks were rosy. What did she know about writing anyway? My writing was its own style. But together we went over the paper and she asked me all sorts of questions. "Why did you use this?" "What did this mean to you?" "What could you use to symbolize this challenge?" "How could you expand here?" Why was she asking me all these questions? The writing doesn't mean anything else than what it says. Or did it? So I rewrote the paper again.

"This is better, but..." But! What did she mean by but? Now what was wrong with it? So I rewrote it again and again. The final paper was worth every part of the A that I got. The experience that I started writing about ended up being more personal than I had expected.

I visited Sally Boland's office many times that semester to discuss my writing and things we were reading. She helped me get over my writing ego and see that I had a lot to learn. I was sad to hear that she had passed. I know that I still have a lot to learn about myself and my writing and I am grateful to have had Professor Boland my first semester to smash my ego and make me write what I really wanted and needed to write.



Of Karma and Courage

by Meg Petersen

I inhabit her space. I think of that every day. I think of it as good karma. I remember her shifting her diminutive form out from behind her massive desk to give me a tour of what was then her office and now is mine. She pointed out the large windows that catch the morning sun and the hole in the upper left corner where hornets entered freely. She said I might want to call maintenance. She'd never gotten around to it.

She hadn't always occupied this office. When I first came to PSC, we were neighbors on the third floor of Reed House—part of a wonderful group of women in the attic. I would often overhear Sally's writing conferences. She would be saying things in her firm but caring way, such as, "Right now this is a private poem. If you want your readers to be able to understand what you were feeling and to feel it too, you will need to give them more information to let them in."

Once I remember overhearing a long conversation with a student about her experience and perception of the 60's. Many times I would hear her patiently making her way through a poem from some introductory literature anthology line by line, image by image, until a light would go on in a student's mind.

So small, she would sit behind her desk when I would come in for advice about handling a class. She would never let herself be intimidated. Sometimes she'd come to class armed with a fistful of yellow drop slips and offer to fill them out for those not quite ready for the maturity and thoughtfulness she demanded of them. She would indeed make them sweat, and learn. But at the same time she believed in her students. She taught to their best selves, and helped them to discover that within themselves. She demanded a lot of them.

Life demanded a lot of her, and she of herself. So many times she showed incredible strength. In the midst of her cancer treatment, I have an image of her trooping across the courtyard between

Reed Hall and Rounds, off to class like a bald elf, her bare head gleaming in the sun.

But when I think of Sally, the moment I will most remember is the hush that followed her reading of her poem “The Patient Addresses her Disease” at the Plymouth Writers Group gathering to celebrate the publication of *Lessons Learned*. She had stunned us all into silence with that reading, in which she addressed her cancer as “old shadow, long time companion.” In that moment I knew I had never known anyone more courageous.



Tony:

Dr. Boland seemed to really care how well students were doing.

One time I got a B and asked if I could redo it, and I did and got an A-.

I think she was seeing if I had ambition.

Roy:

Sally had an eye and appetite for things delightful: literary risks like

a loop

in a
 dee
 loop

poem
!

Tony:

Dr. Boland organized a debate in our class and then unexpectedly she made us all switch sides.

She wanted to see if we could argue the side we didn't believe in; that would tell her if we were willing to do the work to really understand.

Roy:

Sally believed in the importance of everyone developing their voice and expressing their ideas.

She encouraged discussion and tolerated dissent, even while she fought fiercely for her own ideals.

Tony:

Dr. Boland had us write a lot of personal papers.

She wanted us to get to know ourselves better.

She wasn't one of those people who just says "here's knowledge, put it in your head."

She was kind of a personal teacher.

Roy:

Sally was quick to recognize the potential in your writing, especially when she sensed you had shared your heart.

She could praise your best with genuine and open enthusiasm, and she could question with concern what you were trying to say that was not yet intelligible.

Growing Up With WAC

David Zehr

Now that the 20th century is but a thing of the past, many people are focusing their attention on what the future holds. But peering into the future is at best a hit or miss enterprise, in spite of beliefs to the contrary by tele-psychics, tarot card readers, and Ouija board enthusiasts. Enjoyable as it may be to speculate, perhaps all anyone can really say is that for good and for ill, the future promises changes, and we most often lack the foresight to know exactly their nature and consequences.

Without venturing any further into cliché and leaving the metaphysical hi-jinks to those more sympathetic to them, I wish instead to use this article to tell a story, to an extent autobiographical, about something certainly as worthy of our attention as futuristic conjectures—a look back at the past. Since this is a journal about writing, it is, to no surprise, a story, about our Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program—particularly its development at Plymouth State College and its power to effect change both in and beyond the classroom.

The starting point for this story is 1985, a year that, in retrospect, had more than its share of triumphs, disappointments, and tragedies. I'll leave it to the reader to determine which of the following events fit into which categories, but here is a bit of what happened in that year: Ronald Reagan began his second term as President; PLO terrorists hijacked the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* and killed American citizen Leon Klinghoffer; actor Rock Hudson died of AIDS; The Los Angeles Lakers beat the Boston Celtics in the NBA finals (4-2); Madonna began her first road show, the Virgin Tour; *The Color Purple* won the Best Picture Oscar; British scientists discovered a frighteningly large hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica; and the makers of Coca Cola introduced "New Coke." Oh, and Plymouth State College faculty put the finishing touches on a new General Education program. That program, now 15 years old and currently under examination for possible modification, created, among other things, Writing (W) courses in each major.

In order to support the W courses and to reinforce the notion that writing is something that ought to be done in every college level course, a team of faculty, headed by the late Sally Boland, initiated a formal WAC program at Plymouth State. To introduce faculty to the philosophy and methods of WAC, Toby Fulwiler, a national leader in the WAC movement, led a two-day WAC workshop here in May of 1986. Having just finished my first year of teaching at Plymouth State, I felt a bit of good-natured pressure from my Department Chair to attend the workshop. Reluctant at first—after all, I had taught for three years prior to coming to Plymouth State, so certainly I knew all about using writing in the classroom—I finally agreed to participate. Fearing the worst going in (a mind-numbing, pedantic journey into a never-never land of academic buzzwords), I left that workshop both humbled and hopeful—humbled at the realization that my prior attempts to engage students in meaningful writing were, at best, old hat, but perhaps worse, stifling and pedestrian—hopeful that armed with a new attitude toward writing and some new and invigorating techniques, I might

finally begin to use writing as a true learning tool and not just another hurdle for students on the way toward a final grade.

As I prepared my classes for the Fall 1986 semester, I cautiously incorporated some of the new (to me) WAC techniques into my courses—freewrites in all classes, peer review in my research methods course. Seeing the usefulness of these techniques first-hand encouraged me, in future semesters, to apply different sorts of writing assignments on a broader scale.

For example, I used journals for the first time in a research methods course. Prior to the WAC training I received in 1986, I'm not sure that I could have possibly imagined why or how anyone would use a journal in a course devoted to statistics and research design. After doing so, however, I couldn't fathom doing the course without journals. Students wrote of their struggles with statistics, their reactions to ethical dilemmas, their ideas for research projects. My workload was increasing as a result, but getting to know my students better more than compensated for the extra time needed on reading and evaluation. Suffice it to say, I was now committed fully to the idea that WAC wasn't just another superficial fad destined to the same fate as "New Coke" or, in academic circles, "relaxed alertness" (betcha never even heard of that one!).

As the 1980s segued into the 1990s and I used WAC techniques on a regular basis, I also began to look at WAC not only as a means of helping students learn, but also as a mechanism for my own professional development. Up until the early 1990s my uses of WAC techniques were primarily reactive—I would hear about or read about a particular writing technique and then adopt it for use in my teaching. Over time, though, the novelty of some of the techniques began to wear off. Fearing that I might lapse into WAC lassitude, I remembered one day a classic line from Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall*. At the end of the film Allen's character, Alvie Singer, delivers a monologue to the camera in which he comments on the nature of interpersonal relationships. Specifically, he acknowledges that relationships are like sharks—they have to keep moving forward or they die. I think that statement applies equally as well to teaching as it

does to relationships. If one accepts the premise that teaching is a scholarly activity, then obviously moving forward necessitates not only the adaptation of the ideas of others, but also the development of one's own ideas that others may borrow and learn from as well.

Toward that end I began, in the early nineties, to develop writing assignments unique enough to call my own. Examples of such assignments included having students in my introductory psychology class write short stories and one-act plays to learn about research methods; having students in my history of psychology class write a comparative analysis of modern introductory psychology textbooks with those from different historical eras; and, most recently, using team journals in my beginning level psychology course. Evaluative data, collected to explicitly assess the effectiveness of these sorts of assignments, showed that students found them challenging, yet enjoyable.

Encouraged by students' comments, I have, over the past several years, submitted my ideas about writing to both professional teaching conferences as well as journals that publish works on pedagogical innovation. Reactions to my ideas have been consistently positive. In addition to several recent conference presentations, I currently have two articles in press and a third undergoing a second round of reviews. My intent in pointing this out is not to be boastful, but rather to illustrate with a singular example how WAC can inspire faculty to seek new challenges in the classroom, and how those challenges can subsequently be a valuable mechanism for stimulating professional development.

Preparing this article has allowed me to think carefully about both the history of the WAC program at Plymouth State as well as my own role in it. Truly, WAC and I have grown up together at this institution. I can't begin to speak to all of the ways in which WAC has influenced the people on this campus, but if my own experience is any benchmark, then I am confident in saying that such influences have been only positive in character. WAC, for instance, has altered my interactions with students and my expectations for their learning. WAC has fueled my ongoing desire to improve as a teacher

and contributed to my participation in both local and national dialogues on writing and learning. And last but certainly not least, WAC has provided me the opportunity to meet, collaborate with, and even befriend numerous individuals on this campus whose commitment to and passion for writing enlivens our mission as a teaching institution.

I began this story with a brief review of events that surrounded the launching of our WAC program. Back then the year 2000 seemed far, far away. And who could have anticipated the many changes and events that shape our present world: Y2K here and gone with much fanfare but little in the way of anticipated (by some) catastrophe; certain diet peddlers undeserving of any attention whatsoever nevertheless embedding themselves in our cultural consciousness; President Clinton refuting Freud by showing us that sometimes a cigar isn't just a cigar; and the Red Sox winning a playoff game. At Plymouth State, Mary Lyon Hall is now coed; Lamson Library received a long-deserved make-over; the old gym in Silver Hall metamorphosed into Silver Cultural Arts Center; and where cars once prowled through the heart of the campus we now have manicured walkways completely free of combustible engines.

Looking back at all of the local changes, it is heartening to know that WAC continues to thrive, as it ought to if we are to take our institutional mission statement seriously. After all, academic fads will come and go. General Education programs will evolve. But constant throughout all of that should be a commitment to ensuring that our students communicate effectively, learn effectively, and consequently live effectively. WAC has proven itself over the years to be indispensable for ensuring those outcomes. As the College continues to move forward, WAC will undoubtedly experience its own new challenges. But by its having already survived 15 years in the sometimes trying climate of academia, I dare say that having grown up with WAC and having been changed by it, I look forward now to growing old with it.

Confessions of a Newcomer: WAC in HI 112 at PSC

David Flaten

The fall 1999 semester at PSC opened my eyes to several things, but by far the most important thing has been that the keystone to a successful collegiate career is good writing. It cannot be ignored, dodged, or replaced. If students cannot write well, they are unlikely to succeed in the multitude of subject areas that we ask them to explore.

My introduction to the WAC program came by attending two orientation sessions during my first week at PSC. I had already compiled my syllabus for my three HI112 Civilization: Europe and the Wider World courses, but “WACy” ideas compelled me to revisit my syllabus in order to reevaluate my expectations and approach. I am elated that I did. Since I had no real context as a first-timer at PSC, I feared that I would be far removed from the expectations of my colleagues in the department. Reviewing the course description, there was leeway regarding assignments, and I decided to emphasize writing. In my HI 112 courses, writing comprised 60% of the final grade, and though I did not package the class as a writing course,

by chance it became one and that was a fortuitous accident.

The Tao of Journals

The WAC program at PSC opened my mind to the idea that I needed to reassess how I had composed my syllabus for the introductory course. Originally I made writing assignments only 30% of the grade, weighting student performance on a midterm and final as 70%. Remembering the misery of my first semester of college, I shiver as I recall the agony of enduring the first six weeks of chaos before settling into a routine. Unfortunately, nothing could amend the first weeks of poor performance. In reaction to that, in my introductory course I decided to make the bulk of the grade come after the midterm, yet I did not wish to throw away the first six weeks. In an attempt to engage the students, I let echo a word from the WAC team: JOURNALS.

Journal work had come highly endorsed by several people, and it was something I had never tried before. I overcame my reticence and combined the idea of a journal with the need to get students to accomplish something in the first half of the semester that would give them a sense of plugging into the course. I thought to offer them credit incentives to keep up with their reading. In essence I would reward students for doing what they should do anyway, but I justified that by making journal entries only 20% of their grade spaced out over 10 weeks of the semester.

Many students found these short journal assignments irritating, since they were compelled to work each week on the class. Students were required to write 21 one-page reaction essays in an attempt to make them contemplate what they had read in their texts. I expected them to answer some assigned questions about their reading, or at other times had them simply write a reaction—positive, negative, bored, or whatever—to the texts. They got credit for timely submission and for making a credible effort to address the reading material of the chapter at hand. Several times students got no credit by trying to turn in gibberish that had little to do with the chapter, or some got half credit due to the shortness or lateness of their submis-

sions.

Grades on the journal entries revealed several things to me. It happened that those students who scored 18 or better of the 21 possible points over the course of the semester earned grades of B- or better, while those earning under 12 points failed the course. Simply put, those students who worked weekly on the class and submitted the journals did well. This may not seem like rocket science, but it does highlight for me that if students work and follow directions they will have some success.

I will continue to assign journals to get the students to directly address the textbook's issues. I will also trumpet to the skies that slow and steady wins the race—those who complete the weekly assignments succeed. In hindsight those who are motivated to work do, those who are not coast along and hope for the best until the panic of the last two weeks of the semester. In addition, two significant benefits arose that make me wish to keep the journal entries as a part of the course. 1) They are fun to read, in that students encounter ideas and stories that they are unfamiliar with, and their reactions are interesting. For example, I had several people who were amazed to hear that slavery existed outside of America, or that it still exists today. 2) I also had several people confront difficult issues like infanticide, divorce, illegitimacy, plagues, and other “bad news” which few of them had ever seen addressed as historical trends on a worldwide scale. Students also were intrigued by the continued interplay of religion and politics around the world, as well as by the successes and failures of European liberalism.

The uncomfortable reactions students had to challenging information were wonderful, and sparked many to write insightful reactions. The textbooks address some issues that shock or tempt people into altered thought patterns, and those who read seriously and imbibed lecture information had the most probing written commentary. Students need a dose of reality, and the texts I use offer them one avenue to explore some of the world's options. Lectures and occasional videos are passive in their nature, while writing demands active participation—engagement if you will—in ideas, and

that is my primary goal.

For some educators the journal entries are busy work, the kind of silly thing we were compelled to do on days the substitute teacher was in class. I overcame that feeling by noting that though they did take up time, they provided me with feedback on the course and textbooks that was far more insightful than any standardized form. My only regret is that I did not make an effort to compile the best student commentary on the texts, lectures and ideas. They had insights and made connections that I had ignored or not emphasized, proving they had done the work and thought about the ideas. Students made connections between contemporary and older societies and noted the fallacy of unilateral thinking, even without using such terminology.

I suspect that many students were not required in high school to write much formally or informally. Several students in my class had a difficult time expressing their own opinions or perception of ideas. For those that had difficulties with their writing I asked them to reassess their approach and offered them examples, or had them verbally outline their thoughts. The level of skill development was for many students quite low, and their grades suffered. The texts and lectures challenged everybody to try to get beyond their preconceived notions and see alternative explanations, or to appreciate other viewpoints. This challenge, though, was taken up only by those willing to read and write seriously—students who had already been required to write in high school and had achieved proficiency.

Beyond Journals: The Formal Essay

Part of the WAC goal I have seen at PSC is to make students face their demons by confronting their writing deficiencies immediately. The journal assignments allowed students to comfortably write on a focused topic in an informal manner. The goal of journal entries was to explore ideas, reactions and opinions, and I did not consider grammar, punctuation, and spelling for grading purposes. For most of us, scholarly writing is an awful chore that forces us to overcome lazy speech habits, slang, and verbal shortcuts—an ago-

nizing process of trying to convey thought by word. So simple, so frustrating! To help students develop formal writing skills, I require two formal essays in the HI 112 courses and ask students to organize and “professionalize” their written expression as much as possible.

The first writing assignment asked students to write a three-to-four page essay on their perceptions of the goals of eighteenth-century liberalism. They were given the assignment, then heard a lecture on the topic based on their textbook reading. Next, I had them read several short liberal documents, including parts of the *American Declaration of Independence* (1776), *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) by Adam Smith, and *The Declaration of Rights of Woman and Female Citizen* by Olympe de Gouges (1791). We discussed the cultural milieu, vocabulary, and intentions of each author in class, and I encouraged students to speak with me or to visit the College Writing Center for additional help. I gave students four days to compose a rough draft so that the information from the reading and lecture would still be fresh in their minds.

I took the rough drafts home and returned them the following class period, and the final essay was due four days later. The rough draft needed to be submitted on time (10% of the grade for the essay) and have a clear thesis (another 10%). I had several students fail to do a rough draft on time; some never did one at all, but most had credible outlines. In the final essays the problem for many was their inability to organize and support the thesis statement in their introduction. If they had imprecise ideas, the whole assignment went poorly, but few students made the effort to contact me or visit the Writing Center. Twenty-four out of 75 students scored less than 70% on the assignment, but only six failed outright.

I was troubled that one third of the students did less than satisfactory work and wondered if my assignment was at fault, or if my expectations were unrealistic. Eventually, I decided neither the assignment nor my expectations were unreasonable. Three problems resulted in student inability to accomplish the task. The first was that several wrote their essays about eighteenth-century liberalism

without knowing what it was. A second problem was many students did not know how to correctly organize and support a thesis statement. A third problem was an inability to use standard American English so fragments, run-ons, improper word use, spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors abounded.

I have had the unique opportunity to teach introductory level history courses in the last five years in four different states to a diverse cohort of students. I am not sure if my perceptions are universally accurate, but I suspect that there has been significant erosion in writing skills demanded of high school students in many locales. Secondary education emphasizes breadth of knowledge rather than depth, and most testing emphasizes not written methodology but matching, fill in the blank, multiple choice, or blackening the ovals. Teaching writing skills is a long-term and exhaustive process, but is absolutely vital for academic and business success.

Many of my PSC students displayed weak language skills in their first essay, compelling me to spend a class day talking about writing, offering examples of good thesis development, and praising the power of copyediting. I had each student sit quietly and review their essay in class, read my commentary, and try to see areas for improvement. Seemingly, many students had approached the assignment not as part of a long-term learning process but simply as a single unrelated hurdle in their collegiate career. That mentality is unacceptable, and I told them so. Their educational careers have built year by year a repertoire of skills all aimed at gradual improvement. College professors expect that trend to continue; yet I found many students convinced that their first semester was a repeat of high school. Some were shocked by their collegiate performance and took steps to address their weaknesses. I informed all my classes that they could hate the messenger (me) telling them of their writing weaknesses, but that they had to embrace the message—that they had to improve.

The second essay topic concerned analysis of the changes in Russia from 1914 to 1939 by which it became the Soviet Union. Again, the topic was assigned in class and several lectures were

provided to aid students in seeing the kind of ideas they could address, and some primary source documents were assigned as well. I anticipated improvement in the second essay assignment for the class. Six students had failed the first essay, and I hoped to see all of those who had failed rally to succeed the second time around. The 24 students out of 75 who had less than 70% on their first essay were compelled to visit me or the Writing Center for assistance, but some refused to. I had a rude awakening. The same problems arose anew in this assignment—lateness, inability to follow directions, unclear theses—and 13 students failed. To make a long story short, those who failed one or both of the essays, or got less than 12 out of 21 on journal assignments failed the course. Several students failed either the midterm or final exam, yet had enough success in other areas to still pass the course, yet only one person who failed a writing assignment managed to pass the course.

For me the bottom line is that student success across all disciplines and in their careers is contingent on application, assimilation, and contemplation. In writing all three of these come together. Writing assignments that stimulate these activities are essential, but WAC supporters, both newcomers and veterans, must be prepared for frustrations as well as successes. Several students who did poorly on their first essay made the genuine effort to improve on the second by visiting the Writing Center or coming to see me with a rough draft. Unfortunately, a large cohort who did poorly on the first essay refused to accept suggestions, guidance, or help from any source, and followed up their first debacle with another in their second essay. In the end, students open to what PSC can do for them will thrive and get the best we can offer.

Classroom Applications

Spotlight Interviews on Writing Assignments for *Into Thin Air*: David Zehr, Kim Smith & Shane Cutler, and Susan Noel Share Their Approaches

Roy Andrews and Katherine Donahue

In December 1998, the First Year Task Force chose Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* as a common reading for all incoming first-year students. First-year orientation sessions (held in June and August) included a discussion of the first chapter of the book. IAC instructors were asked to include discussion of the book in their classes, and a number of instructors included writing assignments concerning the book in their IAC curricula. Towards the end of the Fall semester 1999, IAC instructors were e-mailed and asked to share any writing assignment(s) they had used with *Into Thin Air*. What follows are three "spotlight" interviews with IAC instructors which show a variety of approaches that can be taken with a writing assignment. These interviews provide successful models for those who wish to include writing assignments in the future, not only in IAC, but also in other courses, and when viewed together they bring to light common methods that are often the foundation of successful writing assignments.

David Zehr's Approach

Over the eight weeks of his IAC course this fall, Psychology professor David Zehr had his IAC students write eight one-page papers in response to articles they read, such as “The Earthly Use of a Liberal Education” and “The Computer Delusion.” These regular writings were basically freewrites, intended to help students engage with the readings. The two page response to *Into Thin Air* was similar; however, when assigning the paper David used the occasion to present his students with the basic point that most academic writing involves rethinking and therefore rewriting, a point that, as David puts it, “most of them had probably not learned in high school.”

David's assignment asked students to choose a theme that interested them from the list developed by the First Year Task Force, themes such as knowing when a goal is wise and worthwhile, and recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of group decision making. They were then asked to write a two-page first draft in which they discussed what they had learned about the theme by reading *Into Thin Air* and how the theme related to their own life experiences, as well as describing their personal reactions to the book. In all parts of the paper they were encouraged to use specific examples from the book to support their assertions. A completed first draft was required in one week, at which time they would all go visit the College Writing Center.

To present this writing assignment David did a great deal of talking to his class about drafts and about what a first draft entails. A first draft, he explained, is a work-in-progress, written without concern for grammar and mechanics. It is a start, a getting out of ideas, a beginning. Nobody writes a perfect first draft, not even professors. David at this time shared with his students some of his writing projects and writing experiences, what his first drafts were like, the rewriting he did, the feedback he got from others, and how he used that to reconsider and revise. In college, David told them, you will need to get used to the idea of revising your writing, and the place on campus that can help you with this is the College Writing Center.

“I wanted my IAC students to learn about the College Writing Center not from a canned tour,” says David, “but from an actual experience in which they used it.” Students, therefore, were required to have a first draft of their papers on the day the class visited the CWC.

At the College Writing Center, David’s students shared their first drafts in small groups of peers and writing consultants. The writing consultants gave response that focused on what the drafts seemed to be saying and whether or not the requirements of the assignment were met. Response was supportive and encouraging, focused in ways that helped writers consider where in their drafts they might want to revise.

“My workload for this assignment,” says David, “was minimal. I read and commented on 19 two-page papers, and the personal element made them particularly enjoyable to read.” David was primarily positive with his comments, giving them bits of praise like “I agree with you here,” or “Yes!” or “This is a well-articulated thought.” He also noted places where he would like to have heard more or would like to have seen a supporting example from the book. Papers were graded check for adequate, or check minus if they needed to do another draft. (Just two or three students received check minuses.)

Next year David plans to give a similar assignment but grade the papers. Some wrote beautiful papers while others wrote only enough to fulfill the assignment, and he would like to reinforce those who put in extra effort. Also, next time he would like to require a third draft, but he’s not sure if he can schedule that. Overall, what David liked most about the experience of assigning this paper was that it reinforced two of his beliefs: that it is very important early on to have students learn about the importance of writing, and that IAC can be a course with meaningful academic experience that relates to their other academic work.

Kim Smith & Shane Cutler's Approach

Early on in the semester, Kim Smith, Director of Alumni Relations, and Shane Cutler, Assistant Director of Student Activities and Greek Life, who team teach IAC, polled their students and discovered that over half of them had no meaningful book in their lives. Apparently, these students had no idea how to make personal value out of what they read. About *Into Thin Air* they said, "I'm not going to climb a mountain, so why do I have to read this book?"

Kim and Shane wanted to teach students how to look at what they were reading and think about how it applied to themselves. This, the instructors explained to their students, involves going beyond the simple story to the themes or ideas of the book and asking, "Is this the truth for me?" Even for those who did not enjoy the read, there was something to be gained by figuring out what themes from *Into Thin Air* could be applied to their own lives.

To foster a personal connection with the read, Kim and Shane developed a journaling writing assignment. As they explained on their assignment sheet, "Journaling in this class is much more personal and conversational than most papers, and it's really not a very difficult assignment to do. Journals help individuals to reflect on a reading, an experience, or life in general. Journals help people to connect academic ideas to their personal lives—it is a record of how you see the world, based on what you have learned."

The actual assignment asked students to write a journal entry, two pages minimum, in which they reflected on the book and what it meant to them. Common themes in the book were mentioned, and students were asked which one they related to and which ones they could relate to their experiences at Plymouth State College so far. As the assignment sheet stated, "This journal is a chance for you to tell us (and yourself) what personal meaning you got out of *Into Thin Air*."

Despite a carefully crafted assignment sheet, many students were initially unsure about how to write a paper that asked them to take control of their learning. "How long should the paper be?" and "What should I write about?" were repeatedly asked questions.

“What you write about and how long you make it is up to you,” the instructors kept replying, and gradually all students got the idea. “Meaningful learning,” Kim says, “is taking something from the outside and making it internal. By writing about it and applying it to themselves, the students can get more from the text and control what they’re learning and processing.”

Once the students got used to the approach, Kim and Shane saw some exciting developments. “Orally, some students complained about the read,” says Kim, “but students probably appreciated the book more after writing about it. Their papers showed that they had made some personal meaning, and they did not complain about the read in their papers.”

Most students wrote about motivation and perseverance. For example, one student wrote about his experiences trying out for an athletic team at PSC. No matter how badly one session may have gone, he kept going back and working towards the ultimate goal of making the team. He related this to the Everest climb. No matter how tired the climbers were, no matter how many setbacks they had, they kept climbing. In his paper this student went on to discuss how perseverance would be necessary to stay on the team and to succeed in other aspects of life at Plymouth, too.

About half of the students received five points by taking drafts of their papers to the College Writing Center for a read. “Next year,” says Kim, “we will require the writing center visit because the papers of those who went were much better than the others.” Kim and Shane each read half of the papers and wrote comments in the margins. They gave points for how well the students had taken themes from the book and demonstrated personal meaning, how well they structured their papers, and how well they used correct spelling and grammar.

The workload for each instructor was about half an hour to create the assignment, half an hour to convey the assignment to students (spread over several different class meetings when the instructors asked if there were any more questions about the assignment and students frequently asked more), and about two hours to read

and comment meaningfully on the papers.

Kim and Shane will definitely use this writing assignment again, as it helped their students make personal meaning out of the assigned book. Also, next time, like this semester, they will assign weekly readings from *Education of Character: Lessons for Beginners* by Will Keim and require regular in-class journal entries on the chapters because those writings, like the one on *Into Thin Air*, allowed their students to make personal meaning out of what they had read.

Susan Noel's Approach

Susan Noel, Library Associate, created her writing assignment on *Into Thin Air* to fulfill several goals. "This assignment," she says, "connected the book to other aspects of the IAC course so it wasn't just a required book floating out there."

Susan had each of her students find a website, any website, that in some way connected to the content of *Into Thin Air*. The paper, a minimum of two pages, was a discussion of the website, a description of how the website was found, and an explanation of the connection made between the website and the book. As the assignment sheet and Susan's oral instructions made clear, the paper had to include a cut-and-pasted passage from the website, as well as the website address. It was also specified that the final paper be printed at a college cluster, and that it meet all format expectations of a standard college paper: one inch margins, standard font size, and double spacing.

Susan's assignment developed from her use of the new IAC computer module with her class, which has freed up her class time-wise. Now she does not spend class time teaching students how to double space and format disks because the module covers that. But, she is quick to point out, even though they pass the IAC computer module, they still might not know how to use the college's word-processing technology and produce a standard college paper. This assignment makes sure students do know how to use the resources

available by taking them through a model of a paper producing process that they might use in any college course.

The assignment also bolstered a class discussion of *Into Thin Air*. Students brought in two printed pages from their chosen website, and that opened a discussion of many things connected with the book. “Several kids brought in stuff about the Sherpas,” says Susan. “They felt the Sherpas were mistreated and exploited, while others took a different position and a discussion opened up from that.” Some students brought in really surprising and interesting things. For example, one student brought in the actual equipment list for the climb that he’d found on a webpage. With web material they brought to class, students supplied the content for class discussions on the book, and in this way the class became more student-centered, and students experienced the confidence-building fulfillment of taking initiative.

Drafts of the papers were due a week after the discussion. “I didn’t tell them about the College Writing Center visit,” says Susan. “I just required a draft of the paper for class on that day. I wanted them to visit the writing center with writing in their hands.”

At the writing center, students shared their drafts aloud in small groups of peers led by a writing consultant. Students experienced the feel of their writing being listened to and taken as real communication. Their interests and ideas were responded to in conversations that encouraged them to talk more about their topics. These conversations affirmed the work they had done reading, researching, and writing, and encouraged some to further develop their papers and clarify their ideas.

After the writing center visit, students put their papers into final draft form and passed them in. “I read the papers, but loosely,” says Susan. “If they were interesting, I read them carefully. If not, I skimmed.” In the margins she wrote comments like, “Hey, this is interesting,” and “I haven’t thought of that before,” as well as other casual remarks about the content, but she made no evaluation or judgment of their ideas. “Students don’t get much feedback from professors with no grade attached, just like people back and forth,”

says Susan, “and this assignment allowed that.”

Credit, which was required for passing the course, was given when they completed the process. If their papers were properly formatted, printed out on a college cluster printer, included a web address, and had a webpage passage cut-and-pasted cleanly, then they passed. “I got an assortment of peculiarly printed out webpages and papers,” says Susan. “Some whipped through the assignment. Others had the usual problems students run into like they lost stuff because they didn’t save, or they were unable to open files, or they didn’t know how to double space, or they forgot to write down the website address. I helped them along, and eventually they got it all right, and through that experience they learned some basic things that will be useful to them throughout their college careers.”

Susan says she would do this assignment again because she feels there’s real value when students go out and find something that interests them. There was no extra work for her to speak of, and doing the paper fulfilled lots of valuable things. Her main piece of advice to others who assign it is this: “You need to be very concrete about the things you want in a writing assignment like this one, both concrete to the students and in your own mind.”

Common Elements of the Three Approaches

These three successful writing assignments offer excellent models for others who decide to include writing assignments in their classes. Looking at all three together, common elements become apparent:

- 1) Give students the opportunity to choose a topic of personal interest
- 2) Incorporate stages of a writing process into the assignment
- 3) Encourage use of the College Writing Center
- 4) Respond to the content of the papers as an interested reader
- 5) Make the assignment requirements clear (written)
- 6) Hold students to your expectations

Though no list of methods can absolutely assure success, these six methods practiced together are likely, as they did with David Zehr, Kim Smith & Shane Cutler, and Susan Noel, to result in a successful experience for others who decide to assign writing in their classes.

I Hate History Papers

Horst Freyhofer

Students often tell me that they like history, but that they hated the history courses they had to take in high school. The only thing they often remember about those courses is that they dealt with one darn thing after another, and that those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat the eleventh grade. Unlike other instructors, history professors frequently feel lucky when their students enter college underprepared, because, as the historian James Loewen remarked, "history is the only field in which the more courses [high school] students take, the stupider they become." He may be dramatizing the point, but many colleagues will agree that he is not far from the mark.

What accounts for this malaise? Bad teaching? It certainly plays a large part, but it is not the whole story. High school teaching, much more than college teaching, is textbook driven, and many studies show that the bulk of the texts is mind-numbing. Teachers either have to ignore them or deliver good teaching in spite of them. A very daunting task. Most of these history texts portray the past,

particularly the American past, as a simple-minded morality play, that repeats itself over and over again. The basic outlines of plots, characters and outcomes are familiar and therefore predictable. Students are to be reassured rather than challenged. Hence, the past appears to be chiseled in stone, containing all the lessons anyone ever needed to know for building a successful future. Yes, “mistakes were made,” but “the right lessons were learned.” There seems to be little room for adding anything of significance. All that students may hope for is to repeat what’s been done before, albeit with better tools. Where people once traveled by horse, they now travel by car, and where they once “conquered the west” they now “conquer space.” History papers are little more than exercises showing “how they did it then.” Booring, many of my students tell me. “I hate history papers” is a statement I have heard more than once, especially after returning papers with disappointingly low grades.

What is to be done? Our faculty currently looks at ways to revise the general education requirements for students. I know that I’ll be laughed out of the room with my proposal to replace our course *Introduction to the Academic Community* with a course called *Iconoclasm of Western Civilization*, though I think such a course would go a long way in reviving students’ zest for learning. I teach iconoclasm in my history courses already, mostly with excellent results. Students learn that history is topsy-turvy. For example, Edward VIII, an open Nazi sympathizer, is remembered as a noble king who gave up his crown for the love of a gay divorcee. Hirohito, an ally of the Japanese militarists, is thought of as a shy marine biologist in glasses who hated war. Woodrow Wilson, an imperialistic sympathizer of the KKK, is revered as a global peacemaker. Students may not care much about foreign heads of state, but they generally care about the image of American presidents. When I give them the opportunity to check what their high school teacher told them about someone like Wilson against what I told them about him, they usually take it. The resulting term papers usually are among the more interesting ones I get to read. Students write with a purpose and like the required detective work to boot. It manifests itself

in clearer writing.

Last term I taught *History and Historians*, a lower division course required for all history majors. I made sure that the students had enough controversial topics from which to choose a class presentation and a term paper. Listening to each other's presentations, students learned many things their high school teachers probably never dared to mention. They learned, for instance, that Helen Keller was not merely "the little engine that could," but also a very independent person who went against the grain of her time. She joined the Socialist Party, the International Workers of the World, and became an ardent supporter of Lenin and Trotsky. Remember the Alamo? It was a fight for slavery against a Mexican society that had outlawed slavery in 1823. Slavery won, freedom lost. How about an example closer to home. In 1970, the Massachusetts' Department of Commerce invited the Wampanoag Indians to join the celebration of the British landing 350 years earlier. The Department asked the Indians for a copy of their speaker's remarks beforehand. It included the following statement: "The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cap Cod four days before they robbed the graves of my ancestors, and stole their corn, wheat, and beans." The Department forbade the speaker to address the celebrants. It therewith censored not some inflammatory falsehood but historical truth.

According to the historian Marc Ferro, the United States has the greatest gap of any Western country between what historians know and what students are taught. I call it Ferro's Gap. When I bring it up in class, I always encounter predictable skepticism. Most students, in fact, think it is the other way around. They attribute my statement, no doubt, to my German accent. But I give them plenty of opportunity to prove me wrong. In their effort to do so, they produce much better papers than they would otherwise. Therewith they also help narrow Ferro's Gap. The point I am trying to make is obvious. Students learn more, and they definitely write better papers, when challenged, especially when challenged individually. This requires skill, patience and is not without risk. Challenging a stu-

dent to write the best paper he or she is capable of can be interpreted as exerting undue pressure. To avoid such pressure, I have seen instructors feel tempted to lower the bar, to make life easier for teacher and student alike. But this is precisely what created Farro's Gap. My own experience tells me that bucking the trend will not only help the students, but in the long run everybody.

"But," I have been asked, "how do you challenge students individually?" Generally students do not mind being challenged. Many, in fact, welcome it. But they also like to receive good grades. To be challenged to them often means to be able to meet the particular expectations of their professors and therewith improve their chances for an A. The odds are in their favor if they stick to the tried-and-true. Hence they write papers that show, often for the umpteenth time, that the Magna Carta was a democratic document, that Columbus discovered America, that George Washington couldn't tell a lie, and that Fidel Castro is a crazy man. That has worked in the past, why shouldn't it work now? Some students even manage to recycle old high school papers in college, sometimes with considerable success. To break the cycle, professors will have to tell students, individually, that they should know better, and prove it. This may involve a number of personal discussions, during which the professor will have to replace the individual student's initial reservations with a sense of trust—trust that the student's efforts to show that he or she knows better will be assessed fairly, no matter the results. This is the area where students can, and often do, challenge their professors. What if a student produces material that suggests that Thomas Jefferson was a racist, Adolf Hitler a genius, or Fidel Castro a humanist? If the student feels that this will not compromise his or her grade, chances are he or she will produce a paper far superior to the one he or she would produce trying to play it safe. I have seen it work to the students' advantage many times, and again in my course *History and Historians*.

For instance, one student, whom I had challenged to go beyond the familiar high school tale of Christopher Columbus, wrote a paper showing, on the basis of indisputable evidence, that Colum-

bus was not the first explorer to discover America, but the last. That prompted his question, “Why is Columbus given all the credit for the discovery of America if indeed he was the last one to find it?” He then proceeded to suggest a number of plausible explanations: Columbus was not the first discoverer, but the first conqueror of America; the invention of the printing press spread his fantastic stories quickly all across Europe; Europeans were unwilling to give credit to non-Europeans who went there earlier. Noticing that Columbus’ picture as the first “true” discoverer survives for the most part untarnished in school texts, he asked, “What purpose could teaching this inaccurate information serve? What price does society pay for instructing its students in such a fashion?” Another student, writing about American leaders, observed, “though the Teapot Dome Scandal was taught in my high school history courses, it was never mentioned that the Secretary of the Interior went to jail, much less that he was brought back from Russia to face the charges against him. There was never any mention of the head of the Veterans Affairs Bureau facing charges of corruption for sending construction contracts to his friends. These things I discovered for myself when I began researching this paper.” Yet another student corrected the mythical picture given of Thomas Jefferson in his high school texts thus: “Thomas Jefferson is world famous for saying that everyone has an equal right to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ However, he owned more than 175 slaves when he wrote that speech, and on average he owned 270 slaves. Most of our history books never mention that he owned slaves, and if they do, it is in a little blurb that tries to downplay the fact.” He then concluded, “again, this is an example of how we fabricate reality to suit our needs.”

I do not challenge students to dig up dirt. When they feel free, and when they feel personally challenged, to find as much of the real story as possible behind the myths propagated especially in high school texts, their first findings seem mostly negative, often accompanied by a sense of disappointment in what they have found and that they hadn’t known about it earlier. But for many this is a necessary first step in liberating themselves from the mind-numbing cli-

ches of the past, and in developing a more realistic sense of their own possibilities to help create a better future. It encourages clear and creative thinking, manifested in clear and creative writing. Students could do worse. They could continue to lament: “I hate history papers.”

Authoring Assessment: Lessons From My Classroom

Irene Mosedale

When I began teaching more than twenty years ago, I don't think the term "authentic assessment" was even part of my vocabulary. I dutifully passed out tests, usually multiple choice and usually from the Teacher's Manual, to my students, who completed them and returned them to me. I graded each one using an answer key and put a letter or numerical indicator on the top of each page. This grade was then transferred neatly into my "rank" book to ensure future ease of averaging a final grade. I felt I knew each and every one of my students, but what, exactly, was it that I knew?

As I taught longer and learned more from my students, I also wanted to know more; more about what they really understood, more than a standardized test could tell me. I began to use writing as a means of assessing and found it to be a most valuable tool in many ways. At the college level, writing continues to allow me to more fully understand and guide the students in my classes. The following are three of the ways in which I use writing as a means of assessment in the class RL306: Reading and Writing in the Elementary School, K-8.

This course prepares future teachers to plan, develop and assess literacy instruction. Throughout the semester, the students explore various theories of teaching reading, become familiar with instructional strategies, and learn to make accommodations for diverse learners. Multiple choice tests and short answer essays let me know the degree to which they can articulate pertinent definitions and literacy concepts; however, in addition to knowing the content of the course, I also want my students to be able to formulate a vision of their own future reading classrooms.

For that reason, I designed a final take-home exam which required them to synthesize their semester's work. I asked the students to envision themselves part way through their first year of teaching. I was coming in to observe them for a 90-minute block of reading/language arts instruction. What would I see? Students would first describe the grade level, student population of their class, classroom layout and then in their own way fully describe what would be happening in the classroom. This type of assessment allows me to see how well students can synthesize theories and philosophies of reading and writing and put them into a cogent framework for instruction. Choosing a grade level, identifying students who may have disabilities, accounting for differences in learning styles and rates, and choosing an approach to teaching literacy require an understanding of concepts rather than just a passing acquaintance with definitions. Students must be able to draw from texts, class discussions, and their own values and beliefs about how children learn in order to effectively frame an actual classroom learning sequence.

This type of assignment requires higher level thinking. Students cannot rely on memorizing definitions; they must be able to put theory into practice. During the two to three weeks that they have to work on this project, students develop their own interpretation of a literacy classroom.

The following excerpt, taken from one student's writing, demonstrates how she chose to address a portion of this task:

You will observe the whole class introduction of a biography entitled *Sir Francis Drake: His Daring Deeds* by Roy Gerard, which the students will all be reading. This literature piece comes near the end of the Explorers theme I will begin today's ninety minute period with a brief introduction to Sir Francis Drake, including salient facts about his background and adventures. I will read part of the biography aloud, emphasizing the rhyming patterns and discussing pertinent vocabulary words (circumnavigated, etc.). Students will read the remainder of the biography with their reading partners.

From this brief passage, I learn many things about this student's beliefs about literacy and teaching. First, I see that she values various forms of grouping in her classroom. She uses "whole group" instruction for the introduction so that all students will have a common framework, yet students are also paired to read together later in the lesson. The fact that she has chosen paired reading instead of the more traditional "round robin" reading lets me know that she believes children working in pairs to create meaning from text is preferable to students sitting in a circle and taking turns reading passages from a book. Subjects are integrated, not taught in isolation. Reading and writing occur in the context of a study of explorers; specifically, Sir Francis Drake. Content is stressed by sharing "salient" facts prior to reading a biography. Students in this class are exposed to various genres of literature, and social studies is taught, not just from a textbook, but with a biography which helps portray Sir Francis Drake as more than a name associated with a date of exploration. In this class, vocabulary is taught within the context of the text and not with isolated drills and worksheets. Phonics (rhyming patterns) is also taught in context, which indicates this student prefers a "top-down" method of teaching reading where students are introduced to a text and then skills and vocabulary are taught meaningfully in context. In each of these components, the student

has made a conscious choice about instructional strategies in her literacy classroom. How much of this information could I have gathered about my student through more traditional testing methods? I believe the answer is “not much.” Writing helps me to more fully know my students, and in this case to get a glimpse of their ability to document classroom practices, which, in turn, are influenced by their beliefs and values about how children learn.

Another student chose to write his exam as though he were a newspaper reporter observing a literacy class.

Mr. G. then says the class will be continuing its talk about Native American literature. He explains why he is dressed casually today (jeans, sweater, old sneakers). The clothes he has on are hand-down clothes and he explains that his clothes are similar to the way that Native Americans learned stories, through something called “oral tradition.”

This brief passage allows me to understand important details about this student’s vision of literacy. First, he clearly sees a need for connections and context. Students are not merely told that legends were passed through oral tradition; they are shown. His “handed-down” clothing is representative of stories that were passed from generation to generation. By writing his exam as a reporter and going outside the parameters of the assignment, he is demonstrating his ability to think for himself, to assess a given task and formulate it to fit his style. Isn’t this what we hope from all of our students? That they can make informed instructional decisions based on theory and knowledge of how children learn? How could I ever know this about a student from correcting his marked boxes of multiple-choice answers?

A third student wrote, “The ninety-minute period addresses a variety of learning styles, with visual clues, auditory work and hands-on experience with the material.” From this brief sentence, I am aware that this student understands the need for differentiated cur-

riculum, that he knows students will come to him with various styles of learning that must be accommodated in the classroom. This writer also values “hands-on” learning to engage students rather than expecting them to passively sit and absorb information.

I could never have predicted the richly detailed accounts of my students’ future literacy classrooms. They wrote in depth about strategies and materials, basals and trade books, styles of learners, and how to meet the diversity of individual needs in the classroom. Most considered ways to integrate curriculum effectively and how to manage cooperative groups. This endeavor took a great deal of time to “correct” or evaluate, but I know the rewards were more than worth it for both my students and me. My students felt empowered through writing about their future classrooms in a way that stretched them to place theory into a conceptual framework of practice.

A second way I use writing as assessment is to have students compose reading autobiographies. Through reflection and self-assessment, they explore their own literacy backgrounds in order to better understand themselves as readers. I ask them to think carefully about their early reading experiences, both at home and in a school setting. Students are then asked to connect these images with feelings about reading, and, ultimately, with perceptions of themselves as readers. Their reflection spans a continuum from the early years to their present attitudes and practices towards reading. These are the only guidelines that I give for this exercise. Students choose the format and length depending on personal preferences.

Many students don’t recall their early years.. As one student wrote, “It was very difficult for me to remember how I learned to read. Therefore, I had to do a little research. I decided to ask my parents. After all, who would know better?” This excerpt shows first, that this student was invested in her assignment. Rather than inventing her early reading behaviors for the purpose of receiving a grade, she chose to call her parents, taking the time and interest to explore her own early literacy. I believe that students show us their “best” when we create learning situations in which we challenge them to do so. She was also able to share these recollections with

her parents as she reconstructed a crucial time in her development.

Not all memories are as positive, however. One student wrote of a very different scenario: “After two weeks of first grade, I was put into readiness because I couldn’t keep up with the work. All through elementary school I was put in the lowest reading groups. As a result, I decided that I couldn’t read well, and no matter what, reading would always be more of a chore than a pleasure.” By identifying instructional practices that caused her to stop feeling successful at a very early age, this student will be able to prevent students in her own future classes from having the same experience. Through her new understanding of child development, hopefully, this student will realize school “failure” is often, at least in part, a result of poor practices and not just perceived inadequacies. When I learn, through this student’s insightful narrative, that as early as first grade she was categorized and made to feel a sense of failure as a reader, I am able to conference individually with her and encourage her to reexamine her beliefs about herself in light of her current, not past, experiences.

Often, students’ feelings about reading emerge from their autobiographies. Here is an example: “I still have that insatiable hunger to read. I read with a passion, a desire to learn, with an interest so strong that the story comes alive in me. I read because literature forces me to test the boundaries of my imagination.” Giving students the opportunity to express themselves through writing on a very personal level allows me to glimpse their inner world of thoughts and perceptions and work more effectively with them, making us both the “learner” and the “teacher.”

This type of assessment gives me insight into my students’ successes, failures, strengths and fears. These narratives are often laden with images of classrooms where teachers used practices which either motivated students to read or forever squelched their desire to pick up a book. By revisiting these former experiences, my students make decisions about their own future classroom practices. Students begin to understand the power they will have as teachers, as well as how their own decisions regarding instruction will impact

future students throughout their entire lives.

Assessment is not just for the students; it is also for me as I plan my own classroom experiences. In addition to the required end-of-semester evaluation, I have my students frequently evaluate their experiences in my classes through writing. Several times each semester, I ask my students to write a short, anonymous narrative of their assessment of the class. I ask that they write about what they think is going well thus far, addressing specific practices and strategies. I also ask them to give suggestions for changes that could benefit the class and make it more effective. Students feel empowered when they know their input is valuable, and I benefit from knowing, as the class progresses, what my students perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of my teaching and class structure. An excellent example of this is when in my reading course at the beginning of the semester several students wrote in their class assessments that having to copy notes from the overhead was cumbersome and detracted from their understanding of the material. I was able to address this concern immediately by photocopying my overhead outlines and handing them out before a discussion. This allowed the students to concentrate more fully on the discussion rather than on frantically copying down notes. Without their input, I probably would not have made this change, at least not in such a timely manner.

I have days, when faced with a mound of written narratives, that I fondly remember the ease with which I used to correct those multiple choice tests. Using writing to assess students' progress and understanding is certainly more time consuming; however, the knowledge that I gain from my students' writing allows me to know them and help them in ways I had never previously imagined. I believe if we want to prepare students to become passionate teachers of reading and writing, we need to give them opportunities to progress as readers and writers themselves. Each group of students with whom I work teaches me more about myself as a reader, a writer, a learner and a teacher. I can only hope I influence them in the same way.

Hidden Behind the Faces that You Love: Seeing Parents in a Different Light

Patricia Cantor and Meg Petersen

“The relationships between parents and their children are much more complicated than I originally thought. You think because you are a child or a parent that you would know all there is to know about the relationship; however, there are always those feelings that are hidden behind those faces that you love.”

--A student in the course

Perspectives on Parent-Child Relationships is a course that we had been wanting to teach for a long time. We hoped to provide students with more than information about parent-child relationships. Through immersing students in literature from different perspectives and about different kinds of parent-child relationships, we hoped to enable them to shift their point of view and come as close as possible to experiencing the relationship from a parent’s perspective. Our own experiences as parents had had profound effects on our lives. As Elizabeth Stone writes, “Making the decision to have a child—it’s momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart

go walking around outside your body.” We wanted to explore with our students what it means to be a parent, what it means to be someone’s child, what it means to be involved in this relationship.

Obviously, we could not hope to achieve these goals in a didactic classroom format. This is not content which can be preprocessed, packaged for classroom consumption, and regurgitated on an exam. We planned a series of experiences, through readings (fiction, poetry and essays about the felt experience of parents), visits from panels of “real-life” parents, and representations of parents and children as seen in popular culture (such as television portrayals, advice books and advertising directed at children). We needed then to provide students with a way of processing the course material and integrating that with their own experiences as children and/or parents. The writing we asked students to do provided the crucial link between the course material and their lives.

Students wrote extensively for this course. We asked them to respond informally in journals to the readings that would be discussed in class. We also used the journals as a way of helping them prepare for and respond to class discussions and presentations. In addition, they wrote five more formal papers. Two of these were structured: one a narrative based on an interview with one or both of their parents or a parent figure; the other an account of a mealtime in their household. We left the choice of topic in the other three papers up to the students, although we required that each paper clearly connect to the course content and/or the readings. Before preparing a final copy of each paper, students reviewed drafts of each other’s papers in class and received feedback from each other and from us. Students then chose three of these revised papers to further revise for presentation in a final portfolio. In this final portfolio, they were also to include an introduction in which they explained how their work for the course had affected them as a son or daughter, as an actual or potential parent, as a writer/reader, and as a person. We also asked them to consider how their thinking about parent/child relationships had changed over the course of the semester and how the pieces they had selected illustrated those changes. (All the quotes

used in this paper, including the opening quote, were taken from the students' introductions.)

Throughout the semester, we had inklings that most of the students in the class had never done the kind of reading and writing we were asking them to do. In the introductions to their portfolios, they expressed this clearly and insightfully.

"I have not had the chance to write many papers other than lesson plans or position papers since I have left high school. High school was a long time ago, and I was glad to be given the chance to write creatively one last time before graduating."

"As for writing, we sure have had our share of writing in this class, but the writing was different from what I was used to. We weren't just researching and writing our findings, we were expressing our feelings and views on a matter. I started to really look at my life and how I could relate it to many of our readings."

This type of writing allowed them to find personal meaning in the course content. They were able to relate the content of the course to their own relationships with their parents and/or their children.

"The readings that we were to complete and reflect on painted vivid pictures in my mind of situations that different families go through. I was able to think about these stories and reflect on them in my journal. This journal created a better understanding of and feeling for the readings. It allowed me to relate the stories to my own life, and share those experiences with others."

"I feel that I have benefited most from the reflective

journal entries and the many pieces of writing I have completed this semester. When I put my thoughts down on paper, they become much clearer ... Writing about the relationships portrayed in the literature and then relating them to my own has been, in a way, a form of therapy. Writing about my relationships with my mother and father has required me to really delve into my childhood and adolescence in a way that I haven't before."

They began to find new meaning in their family lives. One student describes the process of deciding on a topic for her paper in this way:

"I must confess that for me this story happened as sort of an instantaneous combustion sort of thing. I had been wracking my brain for more than a week for an idea for my first paper. The night before the paper was due, I was curled up in my favorite chair, trying to write. I grew frustrated and had just tossed my pad of paper on the floor. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. Several minutes later, I became aware of the night around me and of the sounds in the house. Suddenly, everything seemed so clear to me, so simple. I reached down for the paper and began to write. I knew then that it was not about finding something special to write about, but to write about something simple and ordinary. That through the ordinariness, something special was shared."

As the semester progressed, students began to appreciate how truly difficult it is to be a parent. Many students reported calling their parents to talk about one of the readings or to share something they'd written. Some students began to write from their parents' point of view, or to speculate about what their parents would have

said if they had been asked to speak to our class. “I could always imagine my parents up there talking about me,” one student wrote. “Every parent panel had a piece of my parents in it.” Students also began to think of relationships as situated in particular social and cultural contexts, and how that affects parenting decisions.

“While writing the journals, I found myself looking back on my own life. When we read the stories that dealt with parent/child relationships, I thought about my own relationships with my parents...There was a story that dealt with culture and how some things are so different. It made me think of my grandparents. They have different viewpoints than I have because they grew up in a different time at a different place. Reading these stories and poems helps you see that not everyone and everything is the same.”

“At school, my main role is to live and learn as a student at college. However, I soon realized that my role as a student is not the main issue of this class. I now had to view myself in a variety of roles...through all aspects of the course I was continually evaluating myself as a daughter and sister to my family. I particularly saw this self-analysis through my writings... I found myself seeing my role in my family in a new way. I began to realize what my parents have done to form the family that we have...Through the readings I got a sense of what other families experience and how they deal with their crises or problems...I have had an opportunity to hear, read, and see a variety of parents and families that have succeeded in their own individual way.”

“While writing these pieces I did quite a bit of what one might consider ‘soul-searching.’ I thought about

situations that I had long since decided never to refer to again due to pain. This led me to the rationalization of many feelings that I had never sorted through. I became the ‘outsider.’ I felt as though I was analyzing someone else’s feelings instead of my own.”

“As a daughter, this class has helped me to understand my mother and father’s point of view on issues such as boyfriends, growing up, and leaving for college. It has prompted many discussions and questions about my childhood adventures. I have shared several of the readings with my parents because they have reminded me of moments we have had together. This course has also made me more patient with my parents. I have found myself considering their feelings more often before I speak or act. It has helped me to realize that they are only human.”

Many students reported that they had been unprepared for the amount of reading and writing required for this course. It was challenging for the students to use writing as a way of creating personal meanings. By the end of the semester, they all expressed pride in what they had accomplished as writers.

“Through my journal entries, I think I have been able to speak more freely as a writer. I found myself taking the time to read the articles carefully and then formulating a response that conveyed their impression on me. I believe both my reading and writing skills have improved, as I have become more analytical in my ways of thinking and responding to situations.”

“As a writer, this class has been very challenging. I have never considered myself a good writer because I have never tried to write. I have enjoyed, and be-

come frustrated, by this aspect of the course. I have also been pleased with some of the final writings I have completed.”

“I have never taken a writing class because I didn’t think I was any good at it. I think that this class really impacted me by changing the way I feel about my writing. I had a chance to do some writing about a topic that is important and interesting to me. And the best part was that other people, including myself, enjoyed reading my stories...I am really excited about the pieces in my portfolio. I feel as if they are the most passionate pieces of writing I have ever done.”

At some point or another, all of the students in the class struggled with the ambiguity of the readings and the necessity of shifting perspectives. We began the semester by defining as a class what is meant by a “good parent” and a “good family.” The necessity of responding to the literature in journals continually challenged students to revise and extend these definitions. As one student wrote, “It has made me realize that there are no perfect families or no set standards as to what constitutes a family.”

Many students found it hard to think of their parents as real, flawed human beings, who struggled and made the best decisions that they could. Some found writing about their parents to be painful. One even said, “It is not easy to have to write about someone you love. It feels like I am talking behind her back.” Yet, through writing in response to different parents’ experiences, students gained deeper understandings of their own parents’ perspectives and a greater appreciation for the complexities of parent-child relationships.

“My parents and I have struggled through many battles. I have let them down and they still love me. I am not living the ideal life they would choose for me

but they still love me...Life is full of choices and adventures. Through these we grow as parents and as children. Together we learn to respect and cherish each other as people. I have gained a great appreciation for my parents in the last couple of months.”

The writing we asked students to do enabled them to reflect on many different kinds of family experience and use this lens to reconsider their own. By the end of the course, students seemed willing to give up their notion of the ideal, perfect family, and to embrace the infinitely richer and more complicated reality.

Student Voices

A Conversation Through the Looking Glass

Mary Ann Janda

(Utica College of Syracuse University)

When I first undertook to write this essay, my idea was to revisit some of my early writing, writing I had produced when I was an undergraduate student myself, and then conceive from that a dialogue between myself today and that eighteen year-old woman I found on the page.

I would like to tell you that I did that, and I would like to proceed to the dialogue, but instead I have to confess that I cannot. I've looked at the writing, all right. I've tried to allow it to call forth another me. But for me, the shift of vision that has occurred in the intervening years is too radical. Mary Ann the writing teacher has nothing to say to Mary Ann the student writer.

I suppose it would be more honest to say that Mary Ann the writing teacher has *too much* to say to Mary Ann the student writer. She might begin with a commentary on the evident enthusiasm, but equally evident lack of reflection and revision, in her younger counterpart's work. She would acknowledge that thinking had taken place, but note that it wasn't done with a great deal of care or an eye toward the reader during or after the composing stage. She might comment on the overuse of the intensifier "very," which indicates that the text was not read with an editor's eye. Were these rather lengthy sentences *ever* read aloud? Was time spent reflecting on

the focus of the piece, and was effort expended to sharpen, polish, and clarify? That would be Mary Ann the pedant's response to Mary Ann the student writer.

The brutal truth is that I haven't much patience with Mary Ann the student writer because I recall too much about her writing practice. I recall dramatic sessions in which she dictated whole essays to a patient friend at the keyboard. (All this in the days before personal computing. Nothing can keep Mary Ann of today away from a keyboard.) Mary Ann could type, but just a little in those days; in spite of her family's encouragement, she had resisted "office skills" courses in high school, except for a one semester personal typing course. Her friend would watch her type (the night before the paper was due, of course) and grow so impatient that she would offer to take over, allowing Mary Ann to wax eloquent over her shoulder as she put words on paper.

Thus Mary Ann's essays went right from her busy head to the typewritten page on many occasions. As she progressed through her undergraduate education, however, there developed a stage in which she would sit at the kitchen table and surround herself with materials—other texts, instructions, notes. Here she would craft a kind of ur-document, with scribbles and arrows, squares and circles. It generally looked like the diagram of a complicated football play, or a blueprint for a Rube Goldberg device. Though it was nothing like a preliminary draft, it made enough sense to get Mary Ann started on the typewriter, where composing took place.

Toward the end of her undergraduate days, Mary Ann came much closer to preparing a complete handwritten preliminary draft, giving herself enough time to let it rest, and revising it with more care than she ever did that tumultuous freshman year. But she *never* showed her preliminary work to other writers, let alone discussed it with her teachers. She never visited the writing center, and, in fact, did not *know* there was a writing center until she became a tutor there as a graduate student.

Mary Ann enjoyed writing. She felt great confidence as a writer, and she took pleasure in the act. She just didn't pay much attention

after that. She didn't take pleasure in the reading, the crafting, the thinking further. All that came to her through the crucible of teaching.

So, now, it is impossible to give fair voice to Mary Ann the younger. Why would she have given so little attention to her writing, after the first flush of composing? Why didn't she read and revise? Her thinking was interesting, and the reading itself would have given her pleasure. Why didn't she talk about her work in progress with other writers? I don't understand Mary Ann the student writer. I can't give voice to her views of writing. It's like the chicken trying to talk about what the egg felt, or asking the rain puddle to talk about the cloud.

I feel entirely out of touch with the eighteen year-old writer I was, except, of course, for the fact that I spend every day in writing classrooms with undergraduate student writers who are not entirely unlike that earlier version of me. Like any reader, I seek a version of myself in their texts, hoping to participate in a meeting of minds, working to build new information on familiar ground. Sometimes I see myself too clearly in ways I did not expect.

I don't think Mary Ann the student writer would be happy in the writing courses I teach today. I would be writing in the margins of her work, "Mary Ann, this is an interesting idea that could serve as a focus. Do you think it would work better earlier in the essay?" and "Mary Ann, do you need quite so many 'very's' here? Try to let the adjectives do their work without unnecessary amplification," and Mary Ann the younger would be wondering what all that mattered, now that the paper was written and over with. And I might write "Good!" and Mary Ann the younger would be wondering what I meant by that. And I might write, "I certainly agree with you here! Well-put!" and Mary Ann the younger would ask me to decipher my handwriting, certain that there must be something more to my response than just agreement and support.

That may not be true—I liked to see an "Excellent" or a "Good" in the margin in those days and that is probably why I try to give so many to others when I respond to writing. It was the lengthy—

often substantive—comments that actually honored my writing with thoughtful reflection that I found mysterious. Why write a long note on a paper? The paper is done, it's over—let's have a conversation, certainly, but a conversation on paper? It did not make sense to me. The curtain had rung down. We were on our way to the next writing assignment—why think any further about this one?

I wasn't *inhabiting* my writing in those days. I was passing through it briefly and then moving on to. . . I don't know, I suppose I was inhabiting a student's array of communicative events, a round of reading, listening, note-taking, essay-writing tasks and speaking occasions I hoped would add up to a good performance. The end was not marked by a text in which I felt invested, but instead by . . . well, why not admit it, a grade. I wasn't *trying* for a grade. I had developed a personal philosophy that grades did not matter. I went through a long period of not even opening grade reports. I took care of my intellect, and the grades followed. But the writing was still a path to a grade. It was not an important manifestation of my thoughts. It was just—a kind of passing through.

Today, of course, I *do* inhabit my writing. I spend long stretches of time inside it, expanding it, sorting it out, making it work, and enjoying it. I walk away and return to see it more clearly. I allow it to develop over time. I share it with others.

I suppose what I'm trying to do is develop that fully-formed writer who cares and attends to her text at more than one level and across more than one writing session in each of my students. I see myself in their work, of course. One couldn't help but do so. As Charles Bazerman observes, "In reading student papers, we watch people coming and going, hiding and faking, being and becoming, and sometimes those people are ourselves."¹ I am impatient with my students as I am with the memory of Mary Ann the younger, and as I am sometimes impatient with myself during revising. I am impatient for them to become more patient with themselves. I want to rush them into spending more time inside their writing. Though I am their teacher, I want them to know more than I know and lead me through the text, reducing me to helpless, wordless, awed sur-

render to their voices. I want them to change, as I changed through the multi-layered experience that the teaching of writing is. I want them to change now, in the span of a semester.

I want my students to achieve a shift of vision that has taken me years to achieve in myself. I give them many tools and aids to this shift that I did not enjoy until I began teaching, and of which I have the benefit again and again, every time I teach. I make my students read each other's work, for example. I never had to read anyone else's writing in process until I became a teacher myself. I make them respond sincerely and in detail, as I was encouraged to do as a beginning teacher, and as I gradually learned to do as I read more student writing. I create circumstances in which meaningful, detailed response is required to get through the moment, the class session, the course. I put more pressure on them than anyone ever put on me as a student writer. In truth, they respond well to this pressure. Yet I'm still not satisfied. In fact, my ultimate desire is that they be as little satisfied as I am.

I want them to be transformed as I was. I want the chicken to come out of the egg and start laying eggs herself; I want the rain to fall and soak the ground and make the grass grow all at once, immediately, or at least in fifteen weeks.

As quickly as possible, I want my students to approach that almost exquisite intolerance of irregularity and error that all beginning teachers go through (I couldn't read the newspaper for a while because of the unlovely syntax that glared at me from the page) and *then* I want them to pass through that to a real appreciation of linguistic structures and choices. (I want them to care, but not obsess, about the surface of the text. They must entirely understand the nuanced difference between care and obsession before I am satisfied. I'm obsessed with their achieving the right *degree* of caring.) I want them to become as expert at describing the anatomy of their writing as many of them are at describing human anatomy. I want them to see the skeleton and the musculature of a text, note how it works when it is in action, and feel the force of its movement of thought.

I want them to savor clarity and precision. I want them to appreciate everything there is to notice about a written text—revise and craft it, yes, but then really appreciate it, the way one sits down to appreciate a well-cooked meal one has prepared oneself. Of course, they should also appreciate the appreciation of others, the way one enjoys the pleasure of guests invited to share the meal.

I want them to be rhetoricians, too, of course, and I call them rhetoricians to get them to think of themselves as such. (I don't think anyone called me a rhetorician before I was thirty years old.)

I want all of these things for my writing students, and I think they think of me, as Mary Ann the younger would have, as rather demanding, somewhat eccentric, and probably a little crazy. I'm on the other side of the mirror; I can see clearly where I want them to travel and how far they have to come, but, as I was at their time of life, they are unaware that the journey is necessary.

Tilly Warnock says "In our written and oral responses to students and their texts, we are not telling the truth about the text or about ourselves. We are primarily responding to a situation, to questions posed not only by the individual student but also by the context—of the class, the situation, and the culture."² To this I would add, "the history," as I am an aggregate of all my past experiences with writing and reading, and I bring my history to my student's work. That's what I am supposed to do, and the reason I am a valuable reader. I am encrusted with experience. I look for an aggregate like myself in students' texts; I want to hear a rich voice, loaded with detail, heavy and smooth with confidence. When I hear a voice, I say, in the manner of a stage director, "That's good, but make it richer. Make it deeper. Be confident and assertive. Drag me forward by the lapels." I want to be able to enjoy great writing in my students' work, or writing that is as great as it can be at the moment and in the circumstances it is produced. The students have to determine that level for themselves as writers, but that does not prevent me from always encouraging them to move a little bit further forward.

Warnock describes her desire to learn and be otherwise affected

by her student's writing by saying, "I want to explore and demystify my strategies and style and those of other writers, for myself and for students. I want to knock our socks off with our language so that we stand barefoot on the ground. . . ." ³ The thing is that Warnock and I have been wearing our socks longer; we've had them knocked off more times in the past in more different ways than our students have. We are familiar with the intense pleasure of standing barefoot and we know where it will take us. Our students still need to be persuaded, coaxed, and sometimes enjoined out of their socks; they may not be aware of the wonderful condition of being immersed in written language. My desire is that they have that experience, at least once, in the course of my writing classes. It is a desire to which I am completely committed, and a desire I will never compromise.

So I suppose I have to ask myself if the shift of vision I hope for in my students is a reasonable expectation, or if I have to accept that people come into their writing in their own time and their own way. My answer is that I want both. I want my students to develop in their own time and their own way, but I also want my courses to be transformative. If I did not have a radical shift of vision in mind, I wouldn't be much of a writing teacher.

Endnotes

¹ Charles Bazerman, "Reading Student Texts: Proteus Grabbing Proteus," *Encountering Student Texts*, Ed. Bruce Lawson, Susan Sterr Ryan and W. Ross Winterowd (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989) 139.

² Tilly Warnock, "An Analysis of Response, Dream, Prayer, and Chart," *Encountering Student Texts*, Ed. Bruce Lawson, Susan Sterr Ryan and W. Ross Winterowd (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989) 63.

³ Warnock, 63.

An Article in Review of Article Reviews

Kandace Culver

I took a risk and wrote a poem
 (just for the fun of it):
Sometimes classes are much too drole,
 and need a dose of wit.
 My poetry is harmless,
 and not too deep or dense,
But brushes cobwebs off my brain
 and freshens up each sense.
 This article will explain my need
 to complete such work in rhyme
And will conclude with an example that
 was handed in one time.

In most classes at Plymouth State College that I have taken, the professors use at least two methods for assessing the students' knowledge: testing, which is relatively easy to score, but may not reflect the true scope of a student's ability to use the knowledge, and writing, which most often seems to be a response to a reading or a summary of a reading. This past semester has been no different.

Dr. Turski requested two reviews on articles of our choice in the field of Earth Science, and Mrs. Bass requested ten article reviews—one for each area of health education most often taught in elementary schools. Last semester, Dr. Richey also asked for two article reviews, and since I had two classes with him, I had four reviews to do. His reviews were to be done on articles put on reserve at Lamson Library. Ms. Mosedale, in our Reading and Writing in the Elementary School class, requested a “review” of each of the nine chapters that we read in our textbook.

Article reviews seem to be a popular format for assessing the ability of a student to read and assimilate information. Each professor, however, has his or her own idea of what an article review actually is. Dr. Richey expected us to critique the article, and judge whether the information was accurate or one-sided, and whether it was a true representation of the subject matter. He did not want a summary, because he had already read the articles. He was looking for a higher level of thinking: we needed to gain the knowledge, then evaluate it based on content covered in our classes. Mrs. Bass wanted us to choose articles in many areas of health to expand our resource base, so therefore we needed to provide her with a summary, and then explain how we would use the information in our teaching or in our personal lives. Dr. Turski wanted a straight summary of an article of our choice. If we insisted on adding our opinion, it needed to be a separate section of the paper.

The Curriculum Frameworks put out by the New Hampshire Department of Education stresses “frequent writing practice across a variety of situations and tasks and in all subject areas enables students to refine and expand both their knowledge base and their thinking skills.” According to the frameworks, by the end of tenth grade, students should be able, among other skills, to “use a variety of forms to develop ideas, share information, influence, persuade, create and entertain.” This was best exemplified in my Plymouth experience by Ms. Irene Mosedale. Not only did we need to respond to the nine chapters that we read, but each response had to take a different format. We had to write a poem or play, relate the chapter

to past experiences, relate it to future plans, transform the information into a diagram, review a professional journal article on the same subject, write a letter to a parent or school board member defending our position, and, finally, write a simple narrative. This was the most useful class that I have had in terms of improving my writing ability. In order to reformat the information, I had to fully understand it first. If I had to defend my position to a parent in a letter, I also had to know what the opposition might be. These tasks truly depicted a full synthesis of the subject matter, which is what most teachers hope to get from their students. It was also, by the way, fun.

I visited a fourth grade classroom recently, and the students were working on their book reports (which seemed to be another form of an article review). Three children presented their reports which were based on biographies they had read. One student did a fairly traditional type of report: he told who the main character was and the highlights from the book. The next student took the role of the main character and spoke in the first person. She used a lot of expression in her presentation, and it was rather humorous to see a cute little fourth grader speaking on the subject of the beheading of her mother and the subsequent acquisition of six stepmothers! The third student had made up a board game based on her book. Each square had a problem or situation faced by the main character, and she had cards to draw that gave consequences. Of the three students, I would guess that the last two would be more likely to be able to recall their characters in three years, and have the information as part of their schema on which they will attach more information.

It is too easy to fall into the trap of regurgitating information. Time constraints will not always allow us, as teachers, to encourage the creative process as we should. It may be one of those long-term investments, however, that results in a greater pile of riches at the end of the year, and will be passed on to future generations by the students who become parents and teachers, and remember that fourth grade teacher who let them have some fun with what they were learning.

After writing seven of my article reviews for Mrs. Bass, my second review was due for Earth Science, and I was really feeling uninspired about writing it. I happened to remember Ms. Mosedale, however, and my thoughts started bouncing around, gaining energy as they went. Dr. Turski had not given us permission to be creative in our summaries, but he hadn't specifically said that we couldn't use a different form....the risk gave my ideas even more energy. What resulted was a poetic summary of an article on the planet Mercury, and like all great teachers, Dr. Turski not only allowed me to hand it in, but also gave me extra points for creativity. This poem will never go down in the annals of great poetry, but it was fun to write, and after manipulating the information to get rhymes and rhythms to work, I do not believe that I will ever forget it. Thank you, Ms. Mosedale, for planting this seed!

Ode to Mercury

(a poetic summary of the following article:)

Nelson, Robert M. "Mercury: The Forgotten Planet".
Scientific American. v277 n2 Nov. 1997 p.56(8)

There are many features of Mercury
at which we have only guessed.
Our ability to prove them true
is a futuristic quest.

We see, we compare, we make assumptions
about the many scars
That craters have made on Mercury,
similar to the Earth, the moon and Mars.

The crater, Caloris, obliterated some scarps,
so we know that it came later.
Caloris is like a dating tool:
we see new holes within the big crater.

Cracks and scarps were caused by pressure
as Mercury began to slow.
It changed from an oval, bulging shape
to the sphere that we now know.

In the 1970's, Mariner 10
went exploring Mercury's space.
The acceleration as it neared
proved "Merc's" core is a very dense place.

Being roughly the size of our own moon,
(with a little smaller girth),
Its density would indicate a size
more like the Earth.

Of silica rocks, the outside of "Merc"
is evenly composed;
But if the core is solid or molten iron,
can only be supposed.

Electrically conductive molten materials
create a magnetic field
(on Earth). Does Mercury have the same core
creating its shield?

Or does it have some extra element
like sulfur at its core,
That keeps the iron liquid,
and keeps the core-cooling pace much slower?

Solar winds blow steadily
upon Mercury's magnetic shield,
Bringing in particles that stay
trapped within its field.

But at perihelion
(when the sun is extra near),
Surface crust is broken up
and ascends to the magnetosphere.

Hydrogen, oxygen and helium
scientists have also detected
(within “Merc’s” atmosphere). In addition,
sodium and potassium are suspected.

“Merc’s” poles face away from the sun,
and temp’s could maintain some ice
That came from Mercury’s origin,
but this theory won’t suffice.

The problem is that radar-reflectivity,
which is used as an ice detector,
Can be fooled by sneaky sulfur,
which is also a reflector.

Poor Mercury is not explored,
and information is obscure.
Why don’t we spend more money
to be absolutely sure?

Some say we shouldn’t waste our time:
“It’s really like our moon.”
Others say, “The cost of fuel
would play an expensive tune.”

The spacecraft needs to be
protected from the sun direct,
And from the intense energy
that Mercury can reflect.

A solar-powered thruster,
NASA wasn't willing to try.
Persistence won: now Deep Space One
is on a three-year fly.

If successful, another extended trip
might open up the door
To the observation of Mercury.
Then we will know much more!

The Seldom Heard Voices in Mary Lyon Basement: An Interview With Three College Writing Center Consultants

Alys Culhane

It was a dark and snowy afternoon. Some of the members of the WAC editorial board were sitting around in the basement of Mary Lyon Hall, deliberating about what the upcoming issue of the WAC journal might contain. I didn't come to the meeting with any ideas of my own.

I heard whispers, turned my head, took note of a College Writing Center student consultant and a student writer talking about the writer's paper. Both were visibly excited. This was a scene that I'd seen repeated here so many times that I take it for granted. This was something I'd like to tell other PSC faculty members about.

"Ya know," I blurted, "I'd like to write an article . . . about the writing center consultants . . . I want to write an informational piece, one in which I provide readers with a better overall sense of what consultants do, how they're trained, how they themselves put theory to practice."

"Great idea!" said the journal editor, who quickly made note of

my idea and thus committed me to writing this piece. What I most wanted to do, I decided, was to interview three PSC College Writing Center Consultants, since this would demonstrate that there is no exception to the rule—by and large, there is the shared collective view that the goal of the College Writing Center (as Compositionist Stephen North says) isn't to make better writing, but better writers. I also decided that I'd like for my article to be in question/answer form, so that I might better capture the consultant's voices.

My interview choices were arbitrary. My teaching schedule coincided with those of College Writing Center Consultants Stacey Lucas, Tony Koschmann, and Laura Douglass. However, in the process of interviewing them, I realized that I got lucky; their differing ages, interests, and genders supported one of the primary tenets of writing center pedagogy, which is that in having a diverse staff, writing centers are better able to respond to a wide range of writing-related interests.

I also realized that in my article I'd be indirectly commending Stacey, Tony, and Laura for taking on a job that requires a great deal of time, energy, and dedication. I also knew that being modest individuals, if they ever read what I wrote they'd squirm. Since I didn't want Stacey, Tony, and Laura to squirm alone, I decided to also make note of the fact that their ideas and attitudes about writing center pedagogy are similar to those of other members of the PSC College Writing Center staff, as is their unwavering belief that they are making a difference in assisting their peers. Other College Writing Center Consultants include students Chris Reeves, Tim Markle, and Amanda Ouellette, Assistant to the Director Jane Weber, Dr. Robert Miller, and Director Roy Andrews.

What follows are a culmination of a series of interviews, all of which took place at the end of the Fall 1999 semester and the beginning of the Spring 2000 semester.

The Interviewees:

Stacey Lucas, 20, hails from Woodsville, NH. This is her second year as a College Writing Center consultant. Currently a junior,

Stacey is majoring in graphic arts. She aspires to be a writer/illustrator, perhaps work for a greeting card company.

Tony Koschmann, 19, is from Hudson, NH. Tony has been working in the PSC Writing Center for three semesters. Currently a sophomore, Tony's major is Computer Science. He's unsure of his future career plans, but he's thinking about getting a convertible.

Laura Douglas, 19, is in her third year on the writing center staff. She is a junior, majoring in Physical Science Education and minoring in Theatre. She is currently giving serious thought to teaching high school physics and chemistry.

1. *What prompted you to become a writing center consultant?*

Stacey: In high school, I was the editor of the literary magazine and school newspaper. I began studying art here, but wanted to get back into writing. I figured that I could use my skills as an editor when helping students.

Tony: Before coming to Plymouth State College, I got a letter from Roy Andrews saying that he was interested in talking with me about being a consultant. Roy interviewed me, then offered me a job as a consultant.

Laura: Like Tony, I received a letter from Roy, who wondered if I was interested in working in the College Writing Center. I came in for an interview in April 1996. It (the interview) was quite an experience. After talking for a bit, Roy invited me to sit in on a consultation. It went well—and so they hired me.

2. *Describe your training as a consultant:*

Stacey: I worked for several weeks alongside Roy. I learned about how writing centers work and how to use a non-directive approach. This involved working more indirectly with students as opposed to taking a paper and marking it up with a red pen, which was what I was used to doing.

Tony: I followed a progression. Prior to coming to PSC, I had no experience in working one-on-one with students. My first semester I mostly observed consultations, and did mock consultations with Roy and other members of the CollegeWriting Center. I was also required to do quite a bit of reading. This included *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring* and articles. I also attended staff meetings.

Laura: I first sat in on a lot of conferences with (consultants) Bryan, Michelle, Tim, Sheileagh, Jean, Jane, and Roy. I took in a lot of information on how writing centers work, how people learn. Then I started to work one-on-one with individual clients.

3. *What are your strengths as a consultant?*

Stacey: I'm open, honest, enthusiastic. [Jane Weber, sitting on a nearby couch, interjects: "You're also good at modeling creative approaches such as mapping and brainstorming."] Yeah, another one my strengths is that I'm able to help people put their ideas into visual forms.

Tony: I have no idea. Well, I'm modest. I'm pretty good at listening, for a guy. I'm amazed at how patient I've become. I'm a better listener than I am talker.

Laura: I'm empathetic. I was one of four kids, born into an empathetic situation. I learned how to empathize, not to be judgmental about people. I try not to develop preconceived notions of why people are here. [Pulls out a wallet-sized family photograph.] My father, a doctor, has a lot of wisdom. Like him, I'm a logical thinker. This helps me to see the flow of papers, see possible sequences, what the writer is relaying to the reader.

4. *What was your most memorable experience as a consultant?*

Stacey: I'll have to think about this for a minute. I can picture a few sessions where people walked away grateful – there was good energy between us. I worked with someone on an interdisciplinary proposal. It was his third attempt at trying to get it passed. We fit everything together in a logical way. I ran into him at the bagel shop downtown, and he thanked me for helping him.

Tony: Wow! Gee, that's tough. When do you need this by? Hmm. Well, I created that marketing report for the writing center last spring. And the friends I've made working at the College Writing Center. And reading that Dragnet creative piece at staff meeting with people who are great listeners. All that's been memorable.

Laura: Once a gentleman came in with a poem. He needed to analyze it, to write an essay about the poem. We both had trouble understanding the poem. You see, poetry is my weakest point. There was this one word; neither of us knew what it meant. We got a dictionary and looked it up. Once we had a definition it changed the whole conference. We had an understanding, a collaborative experience. He came back all excited. He'd gotten a B+ on the paper.

5. *What are the most important things that you've learned as a writer/consultant?*

Stacey: I've really grown as a writer. I've learned that it's important to share work. In the past, I've been afraid to put feelings on paper and share them with others. But in working here, I've kinda gotten over that. Sharing is the first step we take in improving our work.

Tony: To be empathetic and use a nondirective approach. This helps both parties. I've also learned not to procrastinate. When you put things off, it can become a real mess. I've also learned that you'll like your job more if you have the attitude that you are doing it because you like it, not because it's required.

Laura: The non-directive approach, this is something that I struggle with. Some people have a lot to say if you ask the right questions, leave them as open-ended as possible. [Pauses.] I've learned so much here, to not push people in directions they don't want to go. I've had the experience of working with different types of people. Everyone wears a different pair of shoes; no one has the same take. We're subjective creatures. You can be objective to a point, but at some point subjectivity enters into it.

6. *In your mind, what are the characteristics of good writing consultation?*

Stacey: Open communication. If there's communication, both the consultant and the student will walk away with a real sense of accomplishment.

Tony: In a good consultation, both the writer and the consultant seem to be enjoying themselves. Both parties are listening to one

another, smiling, making eye contact with one another. If the writer jumps up and leaves, it might mean the session hasn't been that good.

Laura: The writer leaves with a smile. [Pauses.] It's a session in which the writer feels that progress is being made, even if I don't. Signs of progress? They'll tell me. The comments start rolling. You're done talking and they're writing like mad. The student is more excited when they leave than when they first came in.

7. Okay. Let's be a little more specific: what do you see as being the characteristics of a so-called nondirective approach to writing consultation?

Stacey: It starts with making sure you're not coming across as an authority figure who knows everything there is to know about writing. Instead of telling the writer what's wrong, you get THEM to ask questions and think about ways in which they might improve their writing. When I worked for my school newspaper, I edited the work. I didn't have a personal relationship with the other writers. In being nondirective, you come across as a peer rather than as an editor.

Tony: You (the consultant) ask a lot of questions. You need to pay close attention to the writer. And you have to be critical yet positive.

Laura: Lots of genuine, well-thought questions, and a good ear for listening.

8. *What are some of your outside interests?*

Stacey: 24-7 (24 hours a day, seven days a week) I carry around a sketchbook. I write, draw, record things. I'm also the editor of *Exposed*, the PSC Art Department newsletter. The first issue came out in December, the second will come out this semester. [I point to the graphics on the walls, colorful figures in various poses.] Yeah, I did those over break. I modeled them on Keith Haring's work, one of my favorite artists. I also designed the writing center posters.

Tony: I'm currently working at the PSC radio station. I'm now the promotions director. I solicit business ads. This may be ambition talking, but a few of us are talking about writing radio plays and airing them on a bi-weekly basis.

Laura: Deep, thought-provoking conversation which is something I don't get much of. I love a good argument, to hear differing points of view. I'm interested in learning where people are coming from, where they want to go. Actual interests? I'm a theatre minor; I didn't want to be stuck in Boyd Hall for all eternity. I love acting. What draws me to the theatre is the people. They are the most open-minded and are not afraid to be themselves.

9. *What would you like for PSC teachers to know about the College Writing Center?*

Stacey: The College Writing Center is for everyone. Everyone is welcome, no matter what kind of writing they're working on, no matter what stage of the writing process they're at. We get a wide variety of people in here, a whole slew of people with differing majors. We're also fun. At the risk of sounding like a commercial, we're for everyone.

Tony: We take a nondirective approach. Students shouldn't expect us to do the work for them. We give advice, feedback, but push writers to do it on their own.

Laura: I'd like for the teachers to know that we're a valuable resource, and to emphasize this to students. Also, if they give us their assignment sheets, we'll have a clearer idea of what they're looking for.

Between bursts of sound (emanating from the first floor of Mary Lyon Hall) Stacey, Tony and Laura patiently answered my questions, then (because I'm a poor note-taker) answered them again. What emerged were some questions, some answers, enough to show my readers that there is a core group of individuals who are adept at putting writing center theory to practice. As important, my Q and A sessions confirmed what I had only suspected: the PSC College Writing Center student consultants are changing how their peers view writing – and themselves.