

writing across the CURRICULUM



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

Volume III, Number 2

Editorial Board:

Richard Chisholm

Roy Andrews
Dennise Bartelo
Mary-Lou Hinman
Warren Mason

Plymouth State College
Plymouth, New Hampshire 03264

Editor's Introduction

This is the fourth volume of the Plymouth State College *Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum*.

As we welcome nine writers to this issue of the *Journal*, we note the steady interest in WAC at PSC. When Mary-Lou Hinman retired after four years as head of WAC, she was succeeded for an interim year by Sally Boland, who now will be succeeded by Robert Miller.

Under Mary-Lou's extremely capable leadership, the Task Force saw WAC through its start-up and building phases into maintenance of a maturing program.

During the year that she has headed the Task Force, Sally Boland not only maintained the impetus created by the past four years of work but also supported critical analysis of the program and initiated several new programs.

We look forward now to three years under the able leadership of Robert Miller. The College has been fortunate in the leaders it has had.

* * * * *

Contributions to this edition of the *Journal* come from several quarters: two principal administrators, a librarian, a staff member of the Reading/Writing Center, a member of the Education Department, one from Natural Science, and four from English. Perhaps of the most interest to all of us is the student-generated report. These articles reflect the continued widespread and expanding interest in a maturing program.

Here's what you will find in the pages of this edition:

The idea that writing is a source of personal power comes as no surprise to college teachers, but to hear the idea so knowledgeably discussed by the President of the College is heartening. President (and now Chancellor-elect) William Farrell shows how writing is used in an organization. Those who write well exercise a degree of power not shared by those who don't.

As several of us have noted, WAC programs have from the start provided a much-needed forum for professional interaction among faculty. As Theo J. Kalikow, Dean of the College, points out, WAC programs have stimulated discussions of teaching and learning that were practically unheard of half a decade ago. In addition to its many other functions, WAC at PSC has been a faculty support group.

What ideas do faculty at PSC share about standards for writing? What style of writing do we expect students to use? Roy Andrews has surveyed twenty-seven faculty members from various disciplines to raise this question: should students master the traditional language of the discipline, or should they learn to express themselves in natural language?

A couple of years ago, after working with Robert Fitzpatrick of the Lamson Library staff on an assignment for Composition, I sent him a copy of a student research paper. Since the paper was the joint product of our efforts with the student, this seemed a natural thing for me to do, and I was surprised that I hadn't thought of it before. *I* was surprised? So was Bob. He told me that was the first time any instructor had showed him student writing that had issued from his labor. His presentation in this issue of the journal explains how faculty and librarians can more fruitfully collaborate to design effective library research assignments.

A perennial problem for instructors is how to write examination questions that really engage students. Unimaginative questions simply require memory and regurgitation. Walter Tatara shows how to write examination questions that are at once traditional and innovative and that require students to think creatively and apply their knowledge.

There's one thing we'd like to know about: how successful has our

WAC program been? To find out what students thought of the program, Dennise Bartelo and Mary-Lou Hinman teamed up to teach a specially-designed Integrative course and oversaw student researchers. What they found out, displayed here in an authentic report of student voices, is both heartening and chastening. It becomes clear that we need to listen more to such student voices. That means finding ways to encourage them to speak up.

Since about a decade ago when *Time* magazine showed a picture of Jimmy Carter writing his memoirs on a computer, word processors have increasingly become the preferred instrument for writers. Just last year, after years of planning, the English Department installed a cluster of word processors for use in teaching Composition for first-year students. Russell Lord, one of the first to try out the new machines, describes his successes and problems.

College teachers who limit student writing to standard essay examinations and research papers may overlook the possibilities of having students write a newsletter. While fulfilling the objectives of the traditional writing assignments, a newsletter helps students think more consciously about audience, format, and production processes. Larry Spencer shows how he became an instant editor-in-chief and helped his students learn material at the same time they communicated it to others.

Those of us who have encouraged peer review and collaborative learning have run into problems getting students to work productively in small groups. Meg Peterson-González has devised a method to encourage peer review of writing, cross-fertilization of learning, and development of community. It's simple, and it works. I know. I've tried it.

* * * * *

I wish to thank the following persons for supporting this issue of the *PSC Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum*:

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Dick Chisholm
Rumney, New Hampshire

Plymouth State College

Journal on

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The Power of Writing

William J. Farrell

Every year, in my Introduction to the Academic Community course, I ask my students at some point: “What is the most important skill a college president can have?” They always have a wonderful range of answers: charisma, decisiveness, financial acumen, etc. Finally, they want the answer *ex officio*. My response invariably disappoints them. “Writing skills? You can’t be serious! How could writing possibly be so important?”

Their disbelief reflects a basic prejudice in our society today. As a nation, we prize oral communication. The political candidate who speaks well on television or before a live audience is a person who has a key credential for leadership. In this electronic age, writing power may be important to novelists or poets, but surely not decision-makers.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Media presentations of leadership leave out an important ingredient in decision-making, and that is the role of the written document. Whether in business, politics, or the academic world, most corporate decisions involve complex choices. To understand the complexity of a problem, as well as the available solutions, executives and board members must turn to written communications. The written report can present data and a level of analysis that would be difficult to convey in oral form. While we think of a document only as a background piece for committee discussion, it is far more important than that. It often shapes the decision-making process itself, profoundly affecting how the readers decide the issue. A television shot, picturing a board chair announcing a corporate decision, or a chief executive introducing a new product, may capture the drama

of corporate leadership, but it misses the countless hours of analysis that led up to the decision or product. Much of that analysis occurs in written form.

Many people minimize the importance of writing because they believe it goes unread. They observe the huge volume of material that crosses any decision-maker's desk and conclude that the written message has no impact. It is true that most of us receive pounds of paper every week, and that we read only a portion of it. One study of executives in a major U.S. corporation found that only fifteen percent read the body of the reports that came across their desks.¹ Most of them read selected portions, however, such as the Introduction, the Background section, and the Conclusion. My personal experience confirms this finding. During my years on the USNH Board of Trustees, for example, I have noted that the most effective trustees are readers. They may not read everything, but they scan what they receive and judiciously study what they deem important. Since these members greatly influence others on the Board, their reaction to a report is critical.

The very volume of written material underscores the importance of good writing. Effective board members and executives are good assessors of junk communication. They quickly relegate to the wastebasket the puff article, the self-serving critique, the irrelevant publication, or the unnecessary report. On the other hand, they will read (and appreciate) the clear memorandum that states the problem well and argues succinctly.

The impact of a report, a proposal, or even a letter can be so great that I rarely entrust the writing of any document under my signature to another person. I insist on doing it myself, not because I am a great author, but because I want to control my own communication. A well-written letter can avoid a lawsuit, secure a grant, or achieve a vote. A badly written one can lose each of these, including respect for the writer.

For someone who is a president, a CEO, or high-ranking executive, the power of writing rests in its ability to achieve closure. Talk is always just that—talk, no matter what the level. It is the written document that

¹Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen, *Technical Writing and Professional Communication* (New York, 1991), p. 61.

propels discussion to a deeper level and to a conclusion. For the person who is not in a position of authority, though, writing offers another kind of power, and that is the power of access.

Years ago, when I took my first job in academic administration, I was responsible for securing grants from major foundations across the country. As I quickly found out, foundation heads do not particularly want to talk with young development officers who wish to pry funds out of their trust accounts. The hardest problem I had was securing entry. Once I was able to visit the foundation and talk with a foundation officer, I could determine whether the foundation was a possible resource or not. The only access I had was the letter. You cannot imagine how skilled I became at writing letters, not for grants, but for appointments. The serious, cogent, well-written letter is the one way we can reach someone who is beyond our ability to visit or to telephone. It can be remarkably successful in achieving that goal.

I would like to conclude my remarks on the power of writing with one final observation. Did you ever notice that, when people become serious about communication, they want it in writing? For example, New Hampshire voters are normally willing to listen to the oral comments of presidential hopefuls. This year, in the midst of a recession, off-the-cuff remarks were not enough. The voters wanted written plans on how the candidates would improve the economy. Clearly, for all its intrusiveness and power, television has not supplanted the written report when dialogue is truly serious. Writing is still mightier than the screen.

WAC: A Dean's View¹

Theo J. Kalikow

Soon after I became Dean in 1987, Mary-Lou Hinman told me about PSC's WAC program. I had heard of this new thing before, but I didn't know any details. All I thought at first was that if PSC had such a program, this must be a fine and progressive place.

As I learned more about WAC techniques, my reaction was: think of all the effort I put in, all those years of teaching philosophy, to get students to write, and how many things I did wrong! All those hours of correcting papers and covering them with red ink, when I was really trying to help the students improve their ability to write and comprehend philosophical arguments! How come I never figured out a better way?

Let me reconstruct this bit of my history from the late 60s and 70s. I was a fairly typical faculty member at a state university, current in my discipline and a regular attender of philosophy meetings. I was even a person quite interested in teaching, but I did not know of resources outside my field that could help me use writing-to-learn more effectively. If only that institution had had a WAC program!

Now I use WAC techniques in my classes and in many of my presentations. The one-minute summary done near the end of a talk is a real favorite of mine. Recently, I have found that Classroom Research exercises are a source of superb WAC activities. After all, Classroom Research is designed to give good written feedback to the instructor about the success of instructional strategies, and the activities I have

¹Thanks to Dick Chisholm and anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier versions.

used, like the Self-Study of Engaged Learning Time², really force the students to become more self-aware, critical thinkers.

On the institutional level, WAC helps to form a community where people from different disciplines can get together and talk about teaching. Our usual college structure doesn't make this talk easy to arrange, so when it does occur, people are amazed. I've seen this theme over and over again in evaluations of WAC workshops: "I was so happy to be able to talk with colleagues about teaching! The first time in twenty years! How come we never did this before?" These comments are typical and indicate a real need.

WAC supports faculty: this is a function that we don't often consider. Faculty members need to share teaching successes and get help with problems. I mean real talk about our art, craft, or calling, not just "recreational bitching" about students, or the administration, or parking. And talk about research or professional work is not a substitute for serious talk about teaching, either. After awhile it can make you crazy, not discussing the thing you do in class so many hours a week. I know I used to think endlessly about my classes, and I still do, especially in the middle of the night. That's okay, but discussion with others is needed too. Colleagues can give much-needed advice, feedback, encouragement, moral support, and helpful techniques that can help us perform at a higher level. Just having others listen destroys the isolation.

I found this out first by suddenly leaving teaching and becoming an administrator. All at once my office staff and immediate colleagues became a "work family," where we talked a good deal about what projects and problems we had to solve. I realized that I had not had a "work family" for my teaching, even though I had good colleagues with whom I remain friends. WAC can give you a "work family" if you let it. Brown-bag seminars and workshops can provide opportunities to

²See "Self-Studies of Engaged Learning Time, Technique 19", pp. 108-110, in K. Patricia Cross and Thomas A. Angelo, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty*, National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, 1988.

share effective strategies; sharing ideas can lead to collaborative projects and presentations; and colleagues with mutual interests can give each other moral support, and even enlightened criticism, for those brave enough to ask for it.

My focus has been mostly on what WAC offers to the faculty member. But let's keep in mind, always, that WAC techniques help students to think better. I won't go on about the connections between thinking and writing. Readers of this journal are already converted. But the attentive student who uses WAC techniques can learn much, not only about a discipline but also about the processes of learning, clarifying, exploring connections, and following out insights, that can be learned in almost no other way. That's why WAC is an important part of our General Education program.

WAC is one of the most important programs that we have at PSC, both to improve student success and to develop faculty. And with fully half of our present faculty aged over fifty and due to retire within the next fifteen years, WAC will become a key part of our effort to socialize new faculty into our community and help them to become effective teachers for the long run. I intend to continue to support it enthusiastically.

Writing Values Across the Curriculum

Roy Andrews

Working in the Reading/Writing Center gives me a unique view of WAC. I see hundreds of students every semester who are writing papers for professors from all across the curriculum. I see students struggling with assignments that ask for widely different things, students sharing drafts and discussing what they are trying to do, and students sharing returned papers with professors' comments suggesting revisions or explaining evaluations. Seeing all this has led me to know that different professors have different values regarding written work. What one professor considers acceptable writing another considers too wordy or fake or inaccurate.

To learn more about the different writing values held by PSC professors, I did a survey (based on an article by Mimi Schwartz in the January 1984 issue of *College English*) in which I asked twenty-seven PSC professors to read four pairs of writing excerpts and from each pair choose the excerpt they preferred and explain why. The content of each pair was basically the same, but the way each was written was very different. The choices professors made and the explanations they gave made clear some of their writing values.

1) *Context*: As a camp director selecting new staff, which counselor's description of a previous job would you prefer?

A. Twelve-year old boys like to fight. Consequently, on several occasions I explained to them the negative aspects of fighting. Other responsibilities included

keeping them dry (when near the creek or at times of rain), seeing that they bathed, attending to any minor wounds they acquired, and controlling their mischievous behavior. Another responsibility was remaining patient with the children.

B. Twelve-year old boys like to fight. Often I had to stop them. And I had to keep them out of the rain, and the creek, and mischief generally. I had to give them Band-Aids and keep my temper.

Sixty-seven percent of faculty surveyed chose A. Most mentioned more description and/or information as a reason for choosing A, and of those, many said they preferred A because he/she gave more explanation of methods used. For example, "A is more descriptive and articulates methodology. You see he or she has a method for dealing with conflict" (Education). A few professors mentioned the positive tone of A: "A phrase like 'remaining patient' is much more positive and constructive sounding than 'keep my temper'" (Political Science). Others found qualities in A's writing that led them to conclude that A would make a better counselor. "A reflects a more mature person via the more complex sentence structure" (Chemistry), and "A talks about responsibility, which I would want in a counselor" (Mathematics).

Twenty-six percent of faculty surveyed chose B. They did not value the quantity of description or information in A, but rather preferred B for being to the point. They said B was less wordy and communicated better. Rather than finding in A indications of thoughtfulness and maturity, many of these professors sensed something fake. They chose B because "B is more direct, uses simpler language, and is less bullshit" (English). As camp directors selecting staff, they valued the "natural" voice of B over the "educated" voice of A. "As a counselor, B would be better able to relate to kids opposed to A who uses too big a vocabulary and elaborates too much" (Chemistry).

2) *Context:* As a professor, which sociology paper do you prefer?

A. In effect, it was hypothesized, that certain physical data categories including housing types and densities land use characteristics, and ecological location constitute a scalable content area. This could be called a continuum of residential desirability. Likewise, it was hypothesized that several social data categories, describing the same census tracts, and referring generally to the social stratification system of the city, would be scalable. This scale would be called a continuum of socioeconomic status. Thirdly, it was hypothesized that there would be a high positive correlation between the scale types on each continuum.

B. Rich people live in big houses set farther apart than those of poor people. By looking at an aerial photograph of any American City, we can distinguish the richer from the poorer neighborhoods.

Twenty-six percent of faculty surveyed preferred A. They mentioned the preciseness that comes with using the language of a discipline. "B is a lay interpretation of A and while easier to understand probably suffers in being less accurate" (Chemistry). "A defines what will be used to measure the specific urban community it's studying" (Sociology). "'Continuum of socioeconomic status' has greater applicability in a scientific study than 'rich people, poor people' because it is a general term that can be defined and limited in a way that is most useful to the particular study" (Psychology). "A is careful not to draw any conclusions based on supposition" (Education). There is a power in careful, controlled thinking that depends on mastery of a careful, controlled language. These professors want to give their students this power. "As a professor, I would want the student to be learning the language of the field" (Psychology).

Seventy percent of faculty surveyed preferred B. Most of these respondents made negative remarks about student A's attempt to use the language of the field. These ranged from gentle criticisms: "A sounds like someone trying to give the impression of being scientific" (Mathematics) and "A is trapped in jargon" (Psychology), to cutting remarks:

“A is gobbley-gook” (Political Science), “A to me is a lot of garbage” (English), “A seems to border on BS” (Political Science), “A is loaded with BS” (Computer Science), “A reads like a tax form; it’s awful!” (English). These professors said B communicated better. “B makes no pretensions about special methodology, uses no jargon, says what’s obvious obviously rather than cloaking what’s obvious in obscurantist verbiage” (English). “B is clear and concise; A is just a mess. A gets up to ‘thirdly’ without first and second. It is hard to follow. A says ‘could be called,’ ‘would be scalable,’ ‘would be called.’ Well, is it or isn’t it? And there are commas where they don’t belong” (Sociology).

3) *Context*: As a reader of autobiography, which autobiographical account do you prefer?

A. From the start, it was my ambition to have money for the children. I worked late at night to fulfill this goal. But one night my husband came upon the \$100 I had managed to hide from his detection. A quarrel ensued which resulted in my physically attacking him. It was a reflex action, unintentional, and I made the resolution at that time that such an event should never be allowed to occur again.

B. I worked at home making handkerchiefs. Saved every last cent for Senji’s birth. I pulled threads from the material, weaving the many colored threads until one o’clock each morning. Secretly, I hid the money so Papa wouldn’t find it, finally, I managed to save \$100. He discovered my hiding place I went crazy. A big fight happened and I hit him so hard my heart stopped beating. I hit his chest and he slumped down into a chair, he just sat there without speaking to which I looked at him. I hurt him. I felt so badly... but he had gambled all that money I was saving for Senji’s birth. I thought to myself it make no matter how angry I become, I should hit never again anyone on the chest.

Fifteen percent of faculty surveyed preferred A, mostly because they disliked reading B. “I like things that go smoothly when I read. B is hard to read because of bad grammar and poor spelling” (Mathematics). One professor said that “B rambles on while A gives me a clearer picture” (Education).

Seventy-eight percent of professors preferred B. About a quarter said they valued the misspellings and grammatical errors because they helped reveal the person who wrote them: “The language is colorful and evokes images. The errors themselves convey information about the author” (Psychology). Another quarter said they preferred B despite the improper English. “B brings you closer to the situation, even though it has all sorts of things you could put red lines through” (Mathematics). Professors preferred B because they found it more emotional, more personal, more realistic, more interesting and fuller in presenting the situation. As one professor put it, “A is boring” (Business). Some mentioned that B had more detail or information. Several mentioned voice: “A lacks voice, is not real. ‘A quarrel ensued,’ that’s garbage. B really sounds like someone having a fight. There is something genuine in B” (English).

Seven percent of professors said they didn’t prefer either because although B was more honest and interesting, they wouldn’t want to read much of it. “The writing might wear thin” (Computer Science).

4) *Context*: As a professor, which biology paper do you prefer?

A. In March I bought two white mice from the pet store in Concord. I kept them in different cages in my room. For two months, my roommate fed one mouse only milk while I fed the other only chocolate. I borrowed a little scale and we each kept track of the weight of the mouse we were taking care of. We also each kept a journal of our mouse’s activity and appearance.

B. Two white mice were studied for two months. One mouse was fed only milk; the other was fed only

chocolate. Careful measurements of weight were recorded, as were observations of activity and appearance.

Twenty-six percent of faculty preferred A. Most of these professors mentioned the important details in A that are not mentioned in B. "From A one gets a better idea of what occurred. From B one could get the impression that this experiment was done in a lab under controlled conditions. In A you learn that it was done in a college dorm with two different people caring for the animals" (Political Science). Others preferred A because it was written in the active voice. They pointed out that the doers are shown. "B tries to give the impression that the researchers are not involved in the experiment" (English).

Fifty-nine percent of faculty preferred B. Rather than value the additional information in A, they devalued A for having extraneous information. "Though the human perspective in A is interesting, in a research project it doesn't add to the 'science'" (Psychology). "The scientific community is not interested in pet stores, or you and your roommate. Give only the facts necessary in scientific papers" (Political Science). Only one professor who preferred B mentioned the omission of information in A: "A does leave a little out (that there were two experimenters) but I prefer the succinctness of B" (Chemistry). Others also mentioned succinctness as the highest value for this kind of writing. "B is to the point; just the facts and procedure. No fluff" (Biology). Many said B was proper "scientific language" because it was not personal, didn't use "I," seemed more objective, and was more precise and concise.

Fifteen percent of professors had no preference. They were torn between valuing a more accurate account of what was done and valuing conciseness. As one professor put it: "I think it is important to indicate the 'doer' of research. Therefore A is better than B because it indicates the doer. However, some aspects of A are too informal, e.g. 'little scale,' or unnecessary, 'mouse we were taking care of' (it is understood that they would do that)" (Biology).

As you can see, there is not a consensus among faculty about what is acceptable writing. Different faculty members have different values,

not only across the curriculum, but within departments as well. This is healthy; this is life, but this plurality frustrates many developing writers who believe there is such a thing as absolute "well written."

Here at the Reading/Writing Center I am in a position to help students understand that even though one kind of writing is valued in one class, it is not necessarily valued in another. I am in a position that is free of discipline values and demands. I do not grade writing, and so I do not have to set criteria and then reward only those who write the way I want. Instead, when I meet students who are stuck because they think there is such a thing as absolute "good writing," when I meet students who are having troubles because they think that the kind of writing their favorite professor considered good should be considered good by all their professors, I can show them the wide array of reasonable possibilities for preferred writing. What I do, here at the Reading/Writing Center, is encourage students to understand each of their professors' writing values.

Work Cited

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Appendix

Faculty Response by Discipline:

Set 1:

- Choice A = 67% — Education(3), Psychology(3), Political Science(2), English(2), Sociology(2), Biology, Chemistry, Business, History, Mathematics, Computer Science.
- Choice B = 26% — English(3), Biology, Chemistry, Business, History.
- No Preference = 7% — Mathematics, Library.

Set 2:

- Choice A = 26% — Education(2), Psychology(2), Chemistry, Sociology, History.
- Choice B = 70% — English(5), Business(2), Mathematics(2), Political Science(2), Biology(2), Psychology, Chemistry, Sociology, History, Library, Computer Science.

No Preference = 4% — Education.

Set 3:

Choice A = 15% — Sociology, Education, Mathematics, Chemistry.

Choice B = 78% — English(5), Psychology(3), Education(2),
Political Science(2), Biology(2), Business(2), Sociology,
Mathematics, Chemistry, History, Library.

No Preference = 7% — History, Computer Science.

Set 4:

Choice A = 26% — English(2), Psychology, Computer Science,
History, Political Science, Education.

Choice B = 59% — English(2), Psychology(2), Chemistry(2),
Business(2), Sociology(2), Library, History, Political Science,
Education, Mathematics, Biology.

No Preference = 15% — English, Education, Mathematics, Biology.

Research and Writing Assignments That Reduce Fear and Lead to Better Papers and More Confident Students

Robert Fitzpatrick

Some assignments frighten certain students and will cause them to come to the reference desk before consulting any print or computerized library resources—before attempting any research on their own. Not only a lack of library skills but also the assignment itself often causes the fear.

For these students, the frightened ones, the library is a place of mystery. It's easy to pick them out. One of the clues is that they don't carry any books, or at most, just one notebook. The male of this type carries a few pieces of folded paper torn from a spiral notebook, and he has a pen either in his mouth or behind his ear. The female carries the notebook—it's brightly colored. She holds a pen like a talisman warding off what she perceives as the mysterious, and maybe even evil, books that surround her. Both types try to look relaxed. It strains their bravado.

Here's one now.

Act One:

(Disclaimer: This scenario, while true to life, is, of course, fiction. I chose marketing as an example because there has never been a problem with a marketing assignment.)

She's smiling as she passes the circulation desk. She's clicking the pen—a nice touch.

I think to myself, she's happy because she just got an invitation to visit a high school friend for the weekend.

"Hi, Jody!" she screams happily. "Goin' to Tom's tomorrow night? I'm wicked psyched!"

This is clearly avoidance, I think to myself. I can tell by the way she's looking around for someone else to talk to she doesn't like Jody, but she'll talk to her rather than face this assignment.

She affects a studied coolness as she passes the browsing stacks and stops again to talk to friends.

Yup. Avoidance. This conversation will put the assignment off for ten more minutes, but she's headed this way.

Ten final blissful minutes with her friends. It's like the last request of the condemned—a last meal, a final cigarette.

This'll be a bad one, I think—even worse than the guy with the backwards baseball cap, one of one hundred twenty "Intro" students who were all supposed to read an article in the same issue of a journal that, as it turns out, we don't subscribe to. But this is going to be a different kind of problem. I'll bet it's a big assignment, and I'll bet it's due tomorrow.

The moment arrives. This student approaches the reference desk, as a prisoner might approach the bench. The smile disappears. Her mouth opens wide as she noisily chews her gum. Her head drops slightly. Her shoulders sag. She won't look directly at me. She sighs and stares blankly at the catalog terminal on the desk.

Finally, she says, "I gotta write a paper for marketing."

"Oh," I begin, "for a marketing class?"

"Yeh."

"Could you tell me more about the assignment?"

"I just have to write a fifteen page paper for marketing."

"Do you have a copy of the assignment from your professor?"

"No. She didn't write it out."

"Do you have notes?"

"No. I didn't write anything down. She just said we have to write this twenty-five to thirty page paper for marketing...anything we want. It's half of our grade."

"Any aspect of marketing?"

“Yeh.”

“Well, maybe if you told me of some particular aspect of marketing that interests you, we could begin there?”

“Hmmm, I don’t know...just anything.”

“Do you have your syllabus for this course?”

“Not with me.”

“Do you know what the objective of this paper was?”

“Do I know *what...*?”

“Do you know what you were supposed to be learning by writing this paper?”

“No! I just have to—”

“Okay, okay, okay...”

The guy with the baseball cap is looking better all the time. I check to see if we have a syllabus from this course or a note from the professor about the assignment. Nope.

“Did your professor suggest what kind of sources might be appropriate for this assignment? Did she mention sources like the *Business Periodicals Index*, or *ABI Inform*? Does the *F&S Index* ring a bell?”

“No... I don’t remember.”

“Well, let’s start by looking up ‘Marketing’ in the *Business Periodicals Index*. We’ll start by finding something that looks interesting to you and go from there. Let’s see... Here it is ‘Marketing.’ Look, there are about fifty or sixty ‘see also’ references covering all kinds of things: ‘advertising, college student market, environmental marketing, marketing strategy, product life cycle, pyramid selling operations, women in marketing... marketing ethics...’ Anything sound good?”

“But can I get a forty page paper out of any of these?”

“Sure. Why don’t you take a few minutes and look? See if you can find something you’d like to know more about.”

Intermission:

This, of course, is the turning point. Will she remember the assignment? Will she find something to spark her interest? When it’s completed, will the assignment have taught her something about marketing as well as give her confidence in library skills? Will a by-product

of this assignment be a conviction that for the rest of her academic and professional career she can use libraries to learn about marketing, or any other subject, and add to her knowledge of the field? Or, will she learn that the library is a confusing and frustrating place, a place to avoid completely if possible? Rather than an interesting learning experience, will she look upon this assignment, this course, and the library as obstacles to be overcome on the way to a degree? Will this experience further alienate her from the learning experience? Years from now will she sometimes awaken from nightmares set in the library screaming “Marketing!”?

Well, it could go either way. Sometimes this story has a happy ending. More often, it does not. Let’s see how it turns out.

Act Two:

Fifteen minutes later she returns to the reference desk holding the latest volume of the *Business Periodicals Index*. I take a deep breath, and brace myself.

“I thought environmental marketing might be interesting—”

“That would be goo—”

“—so I turned to the section under environmental marketing and read some of the titles.”

“Do you think that topic might be a little too—”

“I can’t believe all the claims some of these companies are making! So I thought to myself, this has *got* to be unethical.”

“It might be a good idea to—”

“And then I found some references to articles about the ethics of environmental marketing. They look really good. I’ve decided to write my paper about the ethics of environmental marketing.”

It happens like this sometimes. A connection is made between an issue and an interest, a connection that can’t be forced. The blank look disappears. She looks me straight in the eye. The gum is still there, but at least the mouth is closed. This is the exciting part of the job, to see the birth of twin fledglings, confidence and enthusiasm.

With more interest I respond, “Well, that’s a good idea, but, you know, you might want to narr—”

“The ones that get me the most are the oil companies who talk about all the good they’re doing for the environment. I want to write about ethical issues involved in the marketing strategies of some of the major oil companies.

“Now I need to find these articles. What is this?” she asks, pointing in the index.

“It’s the journal’s volume number.”

“And this?”

“The page.”

“And what’s this?”

“That’s the title of the journal. Do you think you have enough references? If you need help finding those—”

“No thanks. I just needed to get started. I can do it. I’m gonna talk to my professor tomorrow about what I’ve found.”

Her smile returns.

Three weeks later she’s back. “Thanks a lot for your help. I got an ‘A’ on my marketing paper.”

She passes the reference desk quickly. “Hey, Jody! I had such a wicked good time last weekend!”

I like a happy ending, but, as I said, this is fiction. In fact, this scenario usually has an unhappy ending. Usually, such a vague assignment elicits fear, creates frustration, and fosters resentment.

Assignment Goals:

There are some simple practices that might help students overcome their initial fear of research assignments as well as lead them to more positive research experiences. Following these practices will result in better papers and better attitudes. The better papers will also result in happier faculty.

Let’s first consider the possible goals of research and writing assignments in conjunction with the positive outcomes they bring about. Obviously, these are written from a librarian’s point of view. I’m sure you could add more from the subject-content point of view.

Goal One: Teach students to use the basic resources for research in

the field such as indexes, specialized reference books, bibliographies, and catalogs.

Goal Two: Teach the library research process, and thereby develop students' confidence in their ability to add to their knowledge.

Goal Three: Acquaint students with the important journals and reference sources necessary to stay current.

Goal Four: Teach students to evaluate information critically and to make informed choices about what sources are important.

Goal Five: Teach students the appropriate writing and publication style for the discipline.

If these goals aren't spelled out in the assignment they aren't part of the assignment. The assumption that these goals will be natural by-products of a vague unwritten assignment which gives students no focus, such as "Write a paper about Marketing," is unrealistic. As is the assumption that they already know how to do research. If you ask students if they know how to use the library they will say they do, either because they're embarrassed by what they don't know and don't want to admit it, or because they can't imagine there is anything they need to add to their high school understanding of libraries. If you quiz them about it you'll find the truth. After all, what does a question like "Do you know how to use the library?" prove? If you ask students if they can ski, many would say yes. Would you want to be responsible for forcing them onto a chairlift to the top of the mountain without knowing for sure? They'll probably make it to the bottom, but what will they break on the way?

Fear-Inducing Assignments That Don't Work:

The assignments that don't work can be grouped in three categories: (1) assignments for which there are insufficient resources for the number of students who will want them, or which include impossible

time restraints, (2) scavenger hunts which aren't linked to specific information needs, and (3) vague assignments such as the one in the scenario beginning this article. Usually, these assignments can be adjusted slightly to make them possible, instructive, and maybe even enjoyable for the student.

An actual recurring nightmare, for both students and librarians, is this assignment typically given in "Intro" classes: "Find a journal that relates to this subject and summarize any article that relates to what we've been talking about in class. Only use journals from the past two months." From the library's point of view things were going well up until the time restriction. The indexes aren't useful in such a recent time frame; they are usually two months behind the publication of the articles. So, learning any library or research skills is not a possibility. Goals one, two, and three are not possible with this assignment.

In one actual case relating to this same type of assignment, the library subscribes to the six most important journals in the particular discipline. They're monthlies. This means that only twelve actual physical items will fit the requirement of the assignment, and one hundred and twenty students want them—the day before the assignment is due. When a student is lucky enough to find an appropriate journal, the useful articles have often been torn out by students who have not been taught the value or the considerable cost of journals, or who aren't aware that defacing library materials is a matter of academic dishonesty carrying serious consequences. Since students are usually unable to find even one of the relevant journals, comparing journals becomes impossible. In effect, goal four also becomes impossible, not to mention the damage to materials that will inconvenience other students and faculty.

If the assignment truly requires current articles, the journals should be put on reserve. The students can then invest their time in reading, writing, and comparing, rather than searching for the journals.

Of course, the same problem of limited resources applies to books. Giving an entire class exactly the same assignment leads to a great deal of frustration. The first few students check out the most useful sources. The others may want to do a good job on the assignment, they simply can't.

Scavenger hunts are also often assignments in futility. Every library

I've worked in has faced the problem of the scavenger hunt. For some reason the faculty members who use them are very enthusiastic about them. They mistakenly believe students will be forced to examine many different sources to find the answers, and in the process they will become enthusiastic about the quest for information.

Students don't see the value of answering a question such as: "How many pounds of butter does the average American consume in a year?" when there is no context for the information. It would be more useful to give the students a bibliography of statistical reference works, explain their use and value, and then ask questions these sources would address—questions that are, perhaps, related to a current classroom discussion. Students then know where to look, and they will look on their own rather than merely surrendering themselves to the reference librarian. They will also develop confidence in their own ability to find information. (By the way, according to the 1991 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, per capita butter consumption in the U.S. was 4.3 pounds in 1989, down from 5.4 pounds in 1970.)

To show how librarians view scavenger hunts, let me tell you how one library I worked in addressed the problem: the first librarian to find a scavenger hunt assignment was required to make a copy, answer all the questions, and make the answers available at the reference desk.

The third category of assignments that don't work, the vague assignment, is the most prevalent. It doesn't need any more attention here except to add that it is probably the very prevalence of vague assignments that causes students to groan, aloud or to themselves, when they are asked to go to the library and "write a paper." Somehow the assignments are completed, but the price paid in the currency of frustration and resentment is high. It doesn't have to be that way.

Considerations for More Effective Research and Writing Assignments:

Fear is no longer touted as a technique of great pedagogical worth. Most of the faculty members I speak to want to impart not only a collection of facts, but also the desire and ability to learn about and

analyze a particular subject with some level of sophistication. They also hope their students will become enthusiastic about the subject. I think they are happy if students can achieve all this without too much difficulty. I believe, in most cases, the faculty are very successful. It is not, of course, the librarians' role to teach the subject, nor do librarians want to take on that role. Librarians want students to know that information is available and accessible; that they can develop skill, confidence, and competence in locating information; and that a librarian is willing to help them throughout the process.

Our campus is not rife with terrible assignments. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Truly innovative and entertaining assignments surface frequently. However, if you feel some assignments aren't working, or might be scaring your students, then perhaps the ideas presented here might be worth trying. A faculty and librarian partnership would benefit students and would go a long way toward achieving the goals of both faculty and librarians. These assignment considerations are the foundation of that partnership:

Consideration One: Check to see that the library has a sufficient quantity of relevant resources so all students can accomplish the assignment.

Consideration Two: Place items on reserve if the library doesn't have sufficient resources for the potential demand.

Consideration Three: Discuss the assignment with a librarian so that we can steer students in the direction you want them to go while they are working on your assignment.

Consideration Four: Ask a librarian to speak to your class, if you think this would be helpful, about how to find the materials needed to complete the assignment. With enough lead time we can prepare an appropriate bibliography.

Consideration Five: Send a written copy of the assignment to the

library reference desk. A copy of your syllabus will also help us introduce students to sources that might be informative in other areas of the course.

Consideration Six: Notify the library about problems and successes after the assignment has been completed. The next time the assignment is given we can try to come closer to achieving your goals.

If students understand the assignment, they can almost always ask intelligent and relevant questions to get themselves started. If they don't, they're lost before they begin; if this is the case, the librarians won't be able to help them find their way. Clear possible assignments with written instructions and definite goals will help alleviate student fear and encourage student success and satisfaction with the learning process.

I'm still hoping to hear, "Hey, Jody! I had such a wicked good time doing my marketing paper here in the library last weekend!" It could happen.

Essay Exams: or How to Stop the Grinch from Stealing the Fun Out of Correcting Them

Walter Tatara

One of the problems with certain essay examination questions is that students can simply give back what was discussed in class without having the material mean anything more to them than a subject studied and now one that can be put away (forever).

I can only speak somewhat knowingly about my own discipline—literature—but perhaps some of you may find, in what I have to say, applicability to your own field.

In literature we ordinarily discuss character, plot, setting, structure, theme. On a higher level of discourse terms such as protagonist, antagonist, persona, omniscient point of view, metaphor, symbol, tone, allegory, irony often enter the discussion during class periods.

When it comes time for an essay examination, therefore, it is perfectly understandable that questions such as the following are often utilized.

1. In Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" contrast the narrator with her daughters.
2. Describe the main conflict in Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel."
3. Write a brief essay on the plot of "Blue Winds Dancing" by Tom Whitecloud as a conflict between Indian and White values.

4. In "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather explain the meaning of the final sentence, particularly the word "design." How can the final sentence be interpreted as ironic?

5. Describe the point of view in Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill." Is it in the third-person limited, omniscient or dramatic?

These are all good, legitimate and possibly even standard questions regarding a work of fiction.

In fact I would like to acknowledge the source of these questions which is a recent (1989) Introduction to Literature text entitled *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing* by Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs published by Prentice-Hall.

When faced with these questions, the students would have justifiable concern if point of view, structure, conflict, contrast, irony were not discussed in relation to the particular stories. The danger, then, is to have the essay test an experience in which mostly repetition of known elements is asked for.

As an alternative to this type of essay question I would like to share with you the kind of essay question that I became familiar with in New York State. It is the kind used in the State Regents English examinations.

The following question is of my own devising but it follows the essential format of the Regents type of examination question.

1. E. M. Forster, the English novelist, has written a well-known essay entitled "What I Believe" in which he expresses his own very personal and unorthodox philosophy of life. Choose one short story and one play covered in class and discuss by specific references what you feel the authors "believe" about life and to what extent these beliefs are (or are not) relevant to your life. Give titles and authors.

This question differs from the previous examples since it is more general and allows the students more leeway in answering with specific examples of their own choosing. It also allows students to draw on their own experiences and apply these to the question given.

Well in advance of the essay examination I give a sample essay question that has all the elements that will be contained in the examination question itself and we go through some exercises in class to help prepare the students for the exam.

Obviously the emphasis in this type of question is on the ideas, themes and values that an author expresses. These are usually not expressed directly but indirectly through creation of characters, choice of setting, dialogue, figurative language, conflict and resolution of the plot.

We will have gone over these elements in our class discussions. The students now will have to put them into play in their answers. However, I have found that in this kind of essay question there is a welcome unpredictability and personal dimension in their answers that I enjoy and they profit from.

For those of you wishing to devise similar questions, the main thing you have to do is to keep alert as you do your day to day reading in your field and when you spot an interesting quote note it down for future reference.

I am not saying that I look forward to reading thirty essay exams but with this method I find it less of a "grinchy" experience and even somewhat upbeat.

My experience has been that students taking this kind of exam for the first time find it a different kind of experience and may not handle it adequately. However, with more practice and explanation as the term progresses, I am happy to report that much improvement and self-satisfaction is evident on the part of the students and the teacher.

Student Voices on Writing at Plymouth State College

Gathered and edited by Deborah Boyd, Chris Casco, Mary Cavallaro, Shelby Linton, Seihak Mao, James Morgan, and Joy Seymour. Presented by Dennise Bartelo and Mary-Lou Hinman.

Last year, Volume II of this Journal opened with a faculty “Voices” section culled from assessments of Writing Across the Curriculum at Plymouth. The Writing Task Force knew we should balance the faculty perceptions with a similar assessment of student attitudes, but how? During a Task Force meeting, someone suggested creating an I-Course that would teach students about WAC theory and ethnographic research.

After training, those students would complete an actual student assessment project, submitting a collaboratively written report to the WAC Task Force.

What follows are student voices from that completed assessment report. Students in the I-Course, “Field Research in Writing,” wrote the questions, conducted the interviews of one hundred Plymouth juniors and seniors, and analyzed the results of the interviews. The instructors acted as consultants, not censors. Some student comments were humorous. Others were downright disturbing to two women who have given their souls to the WAC program at Plymouth for the last eight years. But mostly the students’ clear call for more writing was heartening.

We were encouraged by our work with the seven students who did graduate-level research for us in the undergraduate I-Course. All of

them—Seihak, James, Deb, Mary, Shelby, Chris, and Joy—developed a burning interest in their research and are now awaiting faculty response to their findings.

A few words of caution before you begin reading the student comments. One, the project assesses student *attitudes* toward writing at PSC and may or may not reflect exactly what is happening in the curriculum. Two, because ethnographic research is time-consuming, the students interviewed only one hundred students. Nonetheless, they were careful that their student sample reflected the makeup of the student body. Therefore, they interviewed more business and education students than philosophy students, for example. Third, the voices are authentic. Students were *very serious* about what they said. Listen to them.

—Dennise Bartelo and Mary-Lou Hinman

The following are excerpts from student interviews conducted during the fall of 1991:

Describe your current attitude toward writing in your courses. Has your attitude about writing changed during your years of study at PSC?

The student researchers were surprised by the positive attitudes of the majority of people interviewed:

I like to write. I feel more comfortable writing a longer paper than when I first came to Plymouth State.

My writing has become more precise and focused.

I enjoy it more, and the more I enjoy it, the better I do.

I think writing helps you. It helps when you share writing with the class.

At the beginning of the semester it seemed like a lot of work, but it

has gotten more enjoyable. My attitude has changed. I was worried at first about my spelling, but the more you do, the better you get at it.

I have no problem with [writing]. You need to do it so you can learn.

The few students who responded negatively to this question often linked their attitude to the *lack* of writing activities in their courses:

At the moment I'm not really doing any writing so I don't have a good attitude toward it.

I haven't really done all that much writing. . . .

Responses to this and subsequent questions revealed student understanding of the importance of writing skills in their future. A meteorology student said, "I need to write for the public." A business major commented, "I think students should be required to take more writing classes. Writing is something you're going to be doing for the rest of your life, so you need to do it well if you're going to succeed."

In what way has writing been part of the General Education Perspectives you have taken? In what way is writing part of your major?

Responses to these two questions varied depending upon the students' major and courses. Not surprisingly, students seem to write most in the humanities and education:

It seems like every class has a lot of writing.

I have had writing in world politics, all my French classes, and history classes.

Students who have written consistently during their four years at Plymouth felt that assignments had done more than sharpen writing

skills; writing assignments had helped them learn subject matter and “broaden [their] view of the subjects.” Nonetheless, a discouraging refrain surfaced in the responses of a number of students:

Mostly my writing has been in first-year composition and Intro to Literature.

The student researchers were clear in their assessment of student responses to these questions:

Overall, it seemed in majors that utilize writing techniques on a regular basis, the amount [of writing assigned] is adequate and helpful to the students. However, [some] disciplines do not [require] much writing. Integration of more writing in those disciplines [is needed].

What kind of writing has been assigned to evaluate your performance in various courses?

Topping the list of possibilities were essay tests (80%) and research papers (35%), followed closely by academic journals (33%).

Students showed a strong preference for essay tests over multiple choice examinations:

Essays are the best way to test; multiple choice is bogus.

I like essays better. They show what you know, [providing] different [avenues] to display the right answer.

At the same time, students voiced concern about having their grades determined exclusively by tests—essay or multiple choice—to the exclusion of other writing:

I write more on tests than day to day.

Some classes have no writing at all [except] essay questions on tests.

I don't get to show off my writing skills enough.

And many students found essay tests "stressful and difficult to write." They pointed to time constraints that make it difficult to write well without grammatical errors. One student advised, "Don't be so picky. Focus on the subject and don't grade on grammar."

Have you used the Reading/Writing Center? Why not? or What led you there? Describe your experience.

Of the students interviewed, sixty percent had not attended the Reading/Writing Center. Students often said they "didn't feel the need." But some said they "didn't know about it [or] thought it was for struggling students." Some thought the faculty "needs to make people more aware of it." Nonetheless, forty of the hundred students interviewed, referred by a composition teacher, friend, roommate, or advertisement, had attended the Center. Most commented that their experience had been positive:

It is a warm, friendly place, [and] helped to get things started.

The woman sat and brainstormed with me; she gave me ideas.

Only a handful of students were "not comfortable there."

What makes writing hard for you? What makes it easier?

Those faculty who have attended faculty training writing workshops will recognize these questions. It will not surprise you that what makes writing difficult for faculty, makes it difficult for our students as well:

- sitting down and actually getting started
- uninteresting topics

- mechanics
- lack of vocabulary
- poor research skills
- organizing thoughts in a coherent way

The student researchers found only two percent of the interviewees felt that negative feedback was inhibiting. Quite the contrary, most thought feedback from the professor—whether positive or negative—was crucial.

What other elements besides feedback made writing easier for students?

- specific guidelines for assignments
- more practice
- a good resource center like Lamson Library
- working with someone, having someone read your paper
- allowing ample time
- finding a quiet and isolated place to work

If you were giving advice to the professors at PSC about writing, what would you say?

Students emphasized the benefits of more one-to-one teacher/student interaction: “Active interest in student writing is important; just don’t assign a topic and collect a paper at the due date.”

The student researchers noted “the link between writing and thinking.”

One student told them, "You can go to class and 'veg,' but if you have to write, you are getting involved instead of just sitting there." Perhaps without understanding how their words echoed the theory of writing across the curriculum, students said, "Any department is responsible [for] teaching English and clarity [of expression]."

Other advice given to professors was remarkably concise:

- Tell exactly what you expect.
- Prepare sample papers and handouts.
- Leave topic choice up to the student, and do not require a specific length.
- Concentrate on quality, not quantity.
- Keep subject matter interesting.

Some students asked for fewer term papers and more writing throughout the semester. If term projects are given, students suggested periodic checks throughout the semester. As the researchers noted,

The students advise their professors to recognize the value of journals, the collegiality of collaborative writing, and the benefits of presentations and research. They want to be presented with more interesting topics and need to have a clear understanding of what is expected of them."

What piece of writing done at PSC are you most proud of?

In response to this question, one wag reported he was most proud of his roommate's paper which had cadged him an "A" when he submitted it as his own work. Mostly, however, students pointed to a piece of writing which gave them pride of authorship, but not always for the same reasons:

- The paper had received an A.
- The essay related personal experience.
- The subject was interesting.
- The assignment was long and difficult and had pushed them to work hard.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Asked for further comments, only one student said that too much writing was monotonous. Most, in fact, begged for more writing which interests them. The researchers were haunted by one comment that, although more negative than most, echoed some students' apprehension about their writing skills as they leave Plymouth:

PSC has allowed me to find myself scared to death to leave, scared to death that I won't know how to write professionally. I am still not confident about writing four years later. There needs to be more writing.

This cry takes us full circle to the opening question. Students who are leaving Plymouth confident of their skills clearly told us why:

I enjoy [writing] more and the more I enjoy it, the better I do.

You need to [write] so you can learn.

Somewhere between these two camps lie the majority of students at Plymouth State, which suggests we need increased rather than decreased emphasis on writing across the curriculum at this college.

Computers and Composition: Do They Mix?

Russell Lord

English teachers in general have a mixed reaction to using technology in writing courses. Many feel that in order to retain the humanistic orientation of their discipline they need to stand firm against the aggressive force of the inhumane machines. Others feel that the tidal wave is too strong for their waning barriers, and like Matthew Arnold they hear their cause retreating

...down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Is the pen, which was once, according to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, mightier than the sword, no longer a valid weapon? My experience with first year composition students at Plymouth has led me to believe that we no longer need fear the barbarous hordes of technology. Indeed, they have become our allies, indeed, our aides-de-camp. Let me show you how.

Last fall, the English Department made a bold move by instituting a computer classroom. Such a step required planning, and the Department did extensive research both in the literature on the subject, and in working with a consultant from the University of Massachusetts. We found one classroom large enough for the project (Rounds 223), and in consultation with the Academic Computing staff were able to devise a suitable arrangement: a network of twenty-two IBM 286 computers was set up around three sides of the room, with two printers (a dot-matrix and a laser printer). We were able to retain the traditional classroom format

in the center of the classroom, with chairs facing the teacher's desk and the blackboard. In this way we could use the space for courses that would not use the computers. We decided to maintain consistency with the majority of other computer clusters on campus and use the word processor they used, PFS Write Professional, which, although it lacks some features of Word Perfect and Microsoft Word, has proven easy for students to learn.

One instructor experimented with the program in the summer, but it began in earnest in the Fall Semester of 1991 with three experimental Composition classes. I shall confine my observations to the results in my own classroom. During the previous spring, I had found it useful to establish small groups of four or five students who could work with each other in discussing and revising each other's papers. The method, if properly controlled, served to stimulate interest and critical awareness, but I realized that it would not work in the computer classroom, since the greater part of class time needed to be spent at the terminals. In order to maintain the advantages of an interchange of ideas under these conditions, I found it useful to have students work in pairs, criticizing each other's papers after each of three drafts. I used the *St. Martin's Handbook* as a basic text, a modern approach to composition that stresses revision of a series of drafts in a way especially suited to computer capabilities.

I became aware right away that the students were enthralled by the computers. Of course, they all knew beforehand that the course was to be using computers, and signed up for it with that understanding. Nevertheless, I felt it wise to let an expert introduce the class to the machines, and Roger Kleinpeter, Academic Computer Director, graciously offered to do so on their first day. This early experience gave the students a sense of security about the program that for most carried through the semester. Although there are always a few holdouts, most young people today take naturally to computers, and usually in any class there are a few whose expertise is far beyond that of their learning-deprived instructors. A few students knew right away how to access the library holdings, for example; something I was unaware of. They also discovered how to use the wordcount facility, and other aids present in the word processor.

The attachment to their machines, however, made an immediate change in the classroom atmosphere which required a reorientation on my part. I became almost a secondary appendage to the scene, something in the background to which they might appeal if anything went wrong, but by no means as significant as the keyboard and the screen immediately in front of them. I could, of course, gather them together in the center of the room to discuss important techniques, or other matters of importance. But that was no longer the focus of their real concern. I might try to regain more of my traditional commanding role when I graded their papers, but even that seemed less important now that the immediate task of creating words on the screen was before them. Nor is such a teaching role really undesirable. After all, our real purpose is to enable students to develop their own potential, not to glorify our own knowledge or ability. If a new method achieves this, more power to it.

Just what did the computer cluster add to student work itself that could not be accomplished without it? First, it provided a work-station that took away the possibility of interruptions which might occur in a dormitory room with a more traditional mode of homework composition. Second, it enabled a very effective use of the class period itself, with students eager to get down to work even before the hour began, most of them already at the computers before I arrived. Third, for the students it meant that a neighbor or I could examine a printout of an essay and make suggestions for major change without causing a rewriting of the whole. This process has still to be perfected. Students need to learn critical skills in order for it to function smoothly, but the computer has helped them develop these skills more effectively than traditional methods.

My own input has so far been piecemeal, at the specific request of students, since it is nearly impossible to cover all twenty work-stations efficiently during a fifty-minute class period. We are planning to make a monitor computer available to the instructor so that he can read a writer's work from the screen on request. But that has yet to be implemented.

The question then is, did it really achieve its purpose? As with most experiments, the results are not easily measurable. Some students who

have facility with words will progress as well with pen and paper as with computers, although they may find it possible to move faster in the new mode. I kept a portfolio of classwork over the semester, and although the papers are neater than they might otherwise have appeared, overall improvement in most cases does not appear dependent so much on the computer as on the diligence with which they developed a critical sense through interchange of ideas with classmates and with the instructor. The old virtues of diligence and willingness to listen for helpful instruction still carry more weight than any mechanical advantage the computer may provide.

Computer use, of course, has drawbacks. Printers go awry. Terminals cease functioning. Students find themselves unable to recover programs on disks that contain a week's work. These frustrations, however, can be overcome, as the computer center becomes able to handle most of them quickly and efficiently. And in truth I find the computer classroom a remarkable innovation. For me it has provided a wholly new set of challenges, both in overcoming mechanical problems, and in reorienting my own teaching to cope with effects of the new technology. For the students it has provided a new kind of learning, one that develops more reliance on themselves and their classmates to really criticize and help each other, with less dependence on a *magister*, and more upon their own inherent abilities which the non-threatening computer provides.

That they recognize the advantages becomes clear when we examine what is becoming of the program. This semester the number of classes has increased from three to five. I am using a program called "Mindwriter-Descant" that directs the choosing of topics, developing ideas, gaining awareness of audience, organizing and outlining material, and other elements often neglected or superficially expressed, which students are eagerly following before they begin the essays themselves. Such a program could not be effectively pursued without a computer, and it already seems to enlarge their capacity to write substantially. We are moving the computer classroom into a new locale, the former Robert Frost House, where it will be even freer to move forward. We need, however, still to realize that we have in the computer

merely an advanced type of pen and paper, one perhaps better fitted to our age, but still a tool which demands the same essential literary and humanistic understanding that have always characterized good writing and good writing instruction.

"The Inveterate Invertebrate Reporter"

Larry Spencer

Can science be fun? Why not! Often, as depicted by the media, science is a serious business and scientists serious persons. Who among you thinks of Spock as a fun-loving, carefree soul? Not I. He may have a dry sense of humor and those pointy little ears to offset somewhat the seriousness of his visage, but let's face it, he is all work and very little play. I don't think science should be seen in that light and to partially change that view, in the fall of 1988 I had my invertebrate zoology class, a lower division majors course, publish an in-house newsletter.

With me as the chief editor and publisher and the students as cub reporters, the class published *The Inveterate Invertebrate Reporter*, a weekly newsletter devoted to the life and times of the invertebrates. Issue one began with a welcome editorial and a brief biography of the professor, both of which I wrote to inform the students of their future duties and what notable events characterized my life. In that issue I described the three functions of the newsletter: 1. to describe the anatomy, physiology, ecology, and behavior of the different groups of invertebrates; 2. to describe the lives of biologists who chose to study invertebrates; and 3. to provide the members of the class with a chance to develop their talents as writers.

Subsequent issues of the newsletter had three sections, an article on an invertebrate group in the phylum we were studying that week, a brief biography of a famous invertebrate zoologist, and a review of a book dealing with the phylum we were studying. In addition each issue usually included biographies of the students who had written the articles

that week, and bibliographic citations for sources the students used in writing their articles. If time and space permitted, I also included either scanned or hand-drawn pictures of invertebrates. To liven things up, I wrote the headlines for the articles:

Forams: Our testy protozoan friends (this group secretes a calcareous test)

The Molluscs: First-class foot shufflers (molluscs are classified according to the type of foot they have)

Those silver threads amongst the gold may have been Nematomorphans (these creatures are called thread worms)

On the inside looking out: N.A. Croll takes a new view on the Ecology of Parasites. Harvard Press has a hit on its hands.

Water fleas: Even a lake has its problems.

The Publication Process

Figure 1 shows a student-edited copy of the issue that was published on the 21st of October. I will now describe the process used to get to that stage. Each week three students were assigned to write articles. I told two of the students which group and person to write about, but the third student was free to choose any book, as long as it related to the group being studied. The articles were due in my hands on Tuesday and were then given to three other students who were supposed to proofread and comment on the article. The annotations on Figure 1 are the student editorial comments. They were to return the copy with their comments and corrections by Wednesday. The authors were then asked to give me their corrected copy on Thursday. Thursday night I put the newsletter together and xeroxed copies Friday morning before class. Students submitted copy to me as an ASCII text file on a 5 1/4" diskette. I used First Publisher, a low cost desktop publishing program for the IBM computers. The program can use style sheets for newsletters or other common publications, but since each issue had varying amounts of text, I pretty much had to paste-up each as though it were the very first of a new series. The drawings were either scanned and then pasted into the appropriate spot, or space was left empty and I later penciled them in on the final copy.

The Circle

Meg Peterson-González

The circle formed on Wednesday nights. Far from the English department, in a room decorated with meteorological charts, my composition class would sit in silence for an hour reading and writing comments on each other's papers. The circle began as a less threatening way for shyer students to receive peer response, but grew to become much more. Through this written conversation, a community of learners and writers formed and evolved. This community challenged us to engage in honest dialogue, and gave us support, a sense of having been true to ourselves and a chance to be heard. Reflection on the experience led me to see broader implications about the place of the personal in academic life and students' potential contributions to academic discourse communities across the curriculum.

From the beginning, I had structured the composition class to require regular writing. To enable me to respond to students while they were in the process of writing, I required a five-page paper every week on the topic of the student's choice and a weekly conference outside of class. I formally evaluated only revised versions of pieces in portfolios submitted at midterm and at the conclusion of the course. While I did not grade their weekly papers, I underlined mechanical errors and wrote a page of commentary responding to the work. In my written comments, I tended to focus on the effectiveness of the writing. In conferences, I responded more to the content of the papers.

I also wrote a five-page paper every week. I shared aspects of my composing process and my finished papers with the class. The course established a rhythm over the first several weeks, and I was generally

satisfied with its progress. Students seemed to be working on issues important to them in their writing and taking more control of their weekly conferences. But I was concerned about response.

Students needed more response than my comments on their papers each week. During the Wednesday class session, I provided time for students to read their pieces aloud to the class and receive commentary. Those students who availed themselves of this opportunity found it valuable, but most couldn't bring themselves to read their work in front of the group. The same students always seemed to take advantage of the sharing sessions. I was concerned that the majority weren't getting response from their peers.

The idea of the circle was to create a less threatening way for students to get peer response. Written response, while lacking the interactive quality of oral sharing, would allow everyone to receive feedback on their work in a single class period.

To introduce the circle exercise, I simply brought a stapler and some loose sheets of paper to class one Wednesday night and asked everyone to attach several sheets of blank paper to the back of their composition. After we had moved our chairs into a circle, I explained how the exercise would work. To begin, we would pass our papers to the right. We would read the piece we received and write comments on the paper stapled to the back.

I asked students to center their response around two basic questions, "What works?" and "What needs work?" and to be as specific as possible, as this would help the author more than general comments like, "Good paper." When they had written their comments, they were to look for someone else who had finished in order to exchange papers. With these simple directions, "the circle exercise" was born.

Shortly after the first pieces had been passed to the right, a stillness fell over the room as everyone began to read. I turned to the piece which had been passed to me. I noticed my reading of the piece changed when I wasn't underlining errors. I began to relax and follow the words. I wrote on the attached paper, sticking rather strictly to my own guidelines about responding to what worked in the piece and what needed work and looked up for someone to pass it on to. Everyone seemed to

be reading intently; a few were writing comments. The only sounds I heard were noises filtering in from the hall. Finally someone looked up. We crossed the space in the center of the circle to exchange papers.

With this second paper, my reading became even more relaxed. As I read of this student's experience with appendicitis, I found myself thinking about the time I had spent in the hospital with my son's hernia operation. When I reached the end, I read the comments of the student who had read the piece before me. She had followed my guidelines for response rather loosely: "The lead really caught my attention, but I think you should explain more about the hospital room—maybe add more description." Then she had taken off in another direction: "Something like that happened to me once. I could relate to a lot of what you said here. When I was in sixth grade, I had to go to the hospital for an operation on my heel. I was scared and felt very lonely." The piece had also brought up memories for me. I decided to let the author know.

As time went on, my responses in the circle exercise became more those of a person and less those of a writing teacher. I enjoyed my reading more, not worrying if I was teaching them anything, knowing I would write my teacher-oriented comments later. I became more fully a member of the classroom community.

I left it up to the students to choose if they would sign their comments. Most did not. When I received my own pieces back at the end of a circle session, I usually did not know who had written the comments.

I tried several variations on this structure, but the students indicated they preferred the basic format. I occasionally added specific things to comment on (e.g. leads, focus, order, etc.) that we had been discussing in class.

Concentric Circles

Once a routine was established, several things I hadn't anticipated started to happen. I began to notice signs that the expanded audience provided by the circle was affecting the composing process. Students frequently asked in conference if they would have a chance to pass their piece around the circle. Sometimes they asked my opinion on whether the class would like a certain piece. I did not require them to submit the

paper they were currently working on if they did not wish to. I provided the option to submit a previous piece in case the current one dealt with a personal topic the student would not feel comfortable sharing. Most often, however, their reason for not sharing was that they felt those pieces did not represent their best effort.

Students began to care about their writing more and depend on the response they were receiving from their peers. Response validated what was said. One student said he was “testing the power of writing...I have found this tool has infinite leverage.” Another wrote, “Stories have shown me that past experiences can be re-experienced through writing. The experience will never leave you if you have it in front of you.” We learned about the power of being heard. “It helped me to express feelings and write stuff that normally I would not have written.” We learned how our writing could affect readers.

Testing the Waters

Students began to use the circle response sessions to test the effectiveness of their writing. They judged the success of their efforts by their peers’ responses. One student wrote:

I set out to write a cliffhanger. And judging from the response I received, it worked. ‘I must read the ending!’ and ‘When you finish this, you better let me read it!’ were some of the favorable responses I got.

Another explained, “My intentions in writing the piece were to get the feelings on paper. From the responses, I guess I did that.”

But responses that pointed to problems in the piece were also highly valued. Students used these responses to show them where they needed help in the writing. Even though the pieces we passed around were that week’s finished copies, the responses often led to revisions. One student wrote:

The most valuable kinds of responses I got were when people gave me ideas of ways to make the piece better or asked questions that I could use the answers to add more in the paper.

Questions were viewed as signs of reader interest:

The responses that best stay with me are the questions. When you hear or read questions, you know what you have to expand on. You understand what you left out and are able to see what the reader is interested in. Through questions I am able to learn what is more important to others and what needs to be elaborated on more within the story.

As were requests for clarification and more detail:

I liked it when people told me specifically what needed to be fixed.... And I also like it when they (the readers) tell me where they need more detail. I may have it in my head, but they don't understand because it jumps around too much. This helps my story develop into a better story that a reader will better understand.

When the audience expanded beyond the teacher to include peers, revisions made more sense and took on more importance. Even if the writer didn't choose to revise the particular piece being commented on, she took what was said into consideration the next time she sat down to write.

Community

Maxine Greene (1988) describes how we need to open up “a public space, a space of dialogue and possibility” (xi). She holds out hope for education to provide a context for open dialogue between authentic beings. “In contexts of this kind, open contexts where persons attend to one another with interest, regard and care, there is a place for the appearance of freedom, the achievement of freedom by people in search of themselves”(xi). The circle allowed us a space in which we could begin to speak the truth. One student wrote:

A lot of [comments] also supported me when I wrote about topics which were very emotional for me. I was also there for others who

chose to open themselves up, looking for support. I remember one girl wrote about how she didn't want to move into her new stepfather's house after her parents' divorce. Another girl wrote about her sister attempting suicide. It felt good to be able to comment on those papers and support the writer's point of view. This encouraged them to open up even more in the next essay...by sharing our essays we became a unit.

Students began to use this community to seek help with problems. One woman said of a piece she wrote about her troubled relationship with her parents, "I wrote it hoping someone could relate to it and maybe give me some ideas." And sometimes they received it:

The response that affected me the most came from my essay about. . . when my mother announced she wanted a divorce from my father the night before I left for college. The quote was, You are a tough woman, [name]. You are going through a lot and not only are you handling it well, but you can share it with others. I appreciate the fact that you can share this with me.' I don't know who wrote that, but it certainly made me think. I realized I did feel better after writing how I felt in the essay.... This person really helped me to feel better. To whoever it was- thank you!

Some of the support was simple validation for the writer as a writer. One student says simply, "The most valuable information I have received this year is that there are people who like some of the things I have written. This makes me have more confidence and determination to write a piece that is even better..."

The circle created community. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991:1) describes this type of academic community as "an extended family unit that functions as a support system for students' exploration of personal and intellectual literacy development." Our community supported our efforts, spurring us on to attempt pieces we would not have tried to write under normal circumstances.

This community was unique in that while virtually all comments were positive in spirit, the vast majority were given anonymously. We

received support from the group, most often without knowing which individuals it came from.

The trust level was high in this anonymous community. The personal content of the pieces that were passed around surprised and impressed me. Experiences with alcoholism, drug use, suicide attempts, divorce and rape made their way around the circle and were treated with respect. This level of trust challenged us to meet a high standard of honest writing. And the truth-telling taught us writer's truths. As one woman put it, "I learned that honest pieces get the most reaction from your peers. I also learned that it is hard to write pieces that are completely honest."

The Conversation

The circle helped us establish a dialogue in which one piece led to another, not only about personal experiences, but ideas. Papers about experiences would trigger memories or give someone the courage to write about similar experiences. Papers about ideas sparked connections and drew us into communal written conversations. Some papers were written directly in response to others. We developed an ongoing conversation on several issues: abortion, suicide (right to die), and the drinking age among them.

In response to several different papers about abortion, I wrote a paper about how unfulfilling I found the public debate and about the lack of real choices in this country. One of the authors of the papers I was responding to wrote, "You got me thinking. I liked the way you compared your experiences in Santo Domingo with the United States. It gives another perspective." Another wrote, "It's hard for me to see the side of the pro-lifers, but I like how you don't really ram anything down the reader's throat." Another considered the issue for the first time: "I never really thought much about what abortion really means. What was also interesting was the amount of time mothers get off from work after they have a child." Another made a personal connection:

I really liked this. It makes you think about what choices women have in life. I work in a hospital in Somerville, Mass, and I see

poor people who are lacking medical treatment because they do not have money. It is pretty sad to think a baby must have a baby to be loved.

Some students consciously began to use the circle as a forum to inform their classmates about issues important to them like the rain forests, animal research, and capital punishment, or to educate them about things they were familiar with. One writes, "I liked the fact that I could educate the class about a whole other culture so different as Jamaica."

We all learned from this exchange of ideas and experiences. We learned about the ideas, but more about ourselves and the power of writing to reach people and to change lives. One student used a quotation from Bob Dylan to describe the circle: "We were all the same; we just saw it from a different point of view."

Clearly the circle gave these student writers (and their teacher) a way to be heard. This forum inspired us to write better pieces each week and helped us generate ideas. A member of the class put it this way: "Through the process of learning to write I can now see more. Everything has come into focus...In the effort of returning to a whole person, I meet people along the way. This is the gift of living."

Implications

In her study of the academic literacies of college students, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991b) found that university students were asked to write within a very narrow range of forms in their content courses. Their personal understandings of course material were not valued or considered relevant. She recorded no incidents of sharing of student writing outside of the English class.

When the concept of circle response moves beyond the writing classroom's focus on process into content-oriented classes, the purposes expand and the effects are transformed. The power of the circle exercise stems from its dual nature as personal, yet public, discourse.

Students care more about writing they know they will share with peers. Traditionally, academic writing is produced for an audience of one, the teacher, who typically knows more about the subject than the

writer and whose sole purpose in reading is evaluation. Sharing of academic writing among students in a class transforms the writing situation. The writing becomes "authentic" (Edelsky, 1986) in that the writer writes in order to create and communicate meaning. When students care more about their writing, they work to make their ideas clearer to the audience and thus the ideas become clearer to the students themselves.

The opportunity to educate their peers about a topic allows students "authority" in the sense of being an author. Freedom of topic choice enhances this authority by allowing them to establish some turf (Graves, 1983) within the field in an area personally meaningful to them. We should urge students to "start where they are" (Lofland and Lofland, 1984) in terms of topic selection, using their personal histories as a way of identifying potential areas of interest within a field of study, thus maximizing the transformative potential of the class.

Written response demonstrates the social context of learning within a field, and creates a community within which honest dialogue can take place. As students build on and react to each other's ideas, they enter into a collaborative conversation with other minds. This free exchange of ideas introduces them to the process of academic thinking.

Most instructors recognize the value of academic dialogue and try to encourage oral discussion within their classes. Public writing and written response is a natural extension of this concept, but provides several advantages over classroom discussions.

Written response provides an equitable way to share student writing and ideas in a classroom situation. Research suggests that men tend to dominate oral discussions. Thorne, Kramarae and Henley (1983,17) attribute this not to any natural passivity on the part of women, but to "the mechanisms, such as interruption, [and] inattention to topics women raise which men use to control women's silence in mixed sex talk." In a written exchange, everyone's voice has an equal chance to be heard. The option of anonymity increases the chance that all contributions will be equally valued.

The process of writing for a public forum encourages the writer to reflect on content. Applebee (1984) cites four advantages of written over oral discourse in promoting thinking. The permanence of the

written word allows for revision and reflection, while the need for writing to communicate across space and time demands explicitness. The conventional forms of written discourse provide resources for organizing and thinking through relationships among ideas. Finally, the active, recursive nature of writing allows for exploration of the implications of otherwise unexamined assumptions. The writing of short papers to share in class encourages students to consider how their pieces will be received and reflect on the implications of their material.

Suggestions for Implementation

Allow students freedom to write about subjects they care about. Personal connections increase the chance that course material will transform personal understandings. Lofland and Lofland (1984) point to a long tradition of social science researchers who have used their personal histories as starting points for research. They caution that, "without a foundation in personal sentiment, all the rest easily becomes so much realistic, hollow cant." (10)

Keep papers relatively short (no more than five pages) to allow for more responses in a shorter time period and to avoid reader fatigue. Position or reaction papers which assume greater personal voice are better suited to this type of activity than more traditional research papers.

A climate of acceptance in our classrooms encourages expression of differing points of view and free exchange of ideas. Welcome diverse voices and encourage students to bring private literacies into a public forum, creating a space where course material can interact with and shape personal truth.

Bringing circles of written response into the content classroom requires changes in the type and frequency of writing assigned, and larger changes in our thinking about student potential. We need to turn away from deficit models, a focus on what students cannot do, and begin to look at what students do know and can contribute. Change is always difficult, but the potential rewards are great.

Public Spaces, Personal Voices

One of my composition students wrote, "To write to be able to expand on ideas and to clear our minds seems too easy to be a course." Another said, "Words to me are no longer words, they are feelings." He said in writing he is "running toward the truth." I do not believe these matters are peripheral to education. As Toby Fulwiler (1990) notes, "self-knowledge provides the motivation for whatever other knowledge an individual learns and absorbs... In the end, all knowledge is related." (261) Or as one of his students put it, "I put myself into it and I write well. It bothers me when people tell me to make it less personal—to take me out of it. I'm afraid I can't write unless I am in the paper somehow."

"The greatest lie of all," says Chiseri-Strater (1991b), is "that education itself should be neutral, that education should be separated from personal and private knowing, that education should transform students' ideas without transforming students themselves." Academic discourse communities grow out of real dialogue, engaged reading and committed writing. They can become an extension of the private literacies all students bring to our classrooms. Yet, unless a course is structured to foster the concept of community, such discourse communities remain the province of professional scholars writing in academic journals. The circle taught me that communities which support literacy growth and conditions which allow course material to transform students lives happen when we see the personal as relevant to the educational endeavor and provide public space for private voices.

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