

TEACHING WITH WRITING



THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER
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ACTIVE LEARNING?

Mention the word writing, and you'll inevitably provoke a response. Mention writing to university teachers, and the comments tend to group in two categories: concerns about publishing research, and concerns about the abilities of student writers.

Notice that when we (rightly enough) worry about publishing, and when we voice concern about student writing, in both cases we're focusing on writing as a final product: will our papers or essays or articles (our final products) be accepted for publication? How good will these student papers (their final products) be?

But suppose we change our angle of vision for a moment. Rather than viewing writing as a product, suppose we look at writing as what writers--any of us--do whenever we pick up a pencil or pen or whenever we sit down at a keyboard and look at a blinking cursor.

In order to get words onto paper or screen, we think. We hold that pencil or position our hands on the keyboard, the paper or screen is blank, we begin thinking, and the paper or screen begins to fill up with words, notes, whole sentences. It's our thinking that puts them there. We may later change those words or cross them out, and again, it's our thinking that changes them.

In short, whether we're writing a grocery list or drafting a report, writing is thinking. And the most useful (and accurate) way to view writing-intensive courses is to realize that they could just as easily be called thinking-intensive or learning-intensive courses, with writing being the vehicle for encouraging and prompting that thinking, that learning.

Once writing is seen as an action--as active thinking--then all sorts of possibilities begin to

suggest themselves. We could, for example, ask students to summarize a key lecture point: *Take three minutes and use your own words to summarize what we've just been talking about; if you're not sure what the key points are, write at least one useful question.*

Does this three minute writing need to be collected and graded? No. It could be collected and used to gauge the lecture's effectiveness. It could be collected and noted with a check in the grade book. It could become part of the student's course journal or learning log. But in any case, there's no need to formally grade such writing.

The point is that asking students to do that three minute write is a way to provoke them all to become active learners, active participants in their own education. In a lecture, perhaps only one person is obviously active (the teacher), in a discussion perhaps half a dozen will really voice their thoughts, but in a three minute write virtually everyone will write, if for no other reason than because it's embarrassing not to.

FACULTY SEMINAR SCHEDULED

The WIC (Writing Intensive Curriculum) program supports faculty members in their use writing intensive teaching techniques and offers consultation and information to departments as they design and propose WIC courses for the new baccalaureate core. Lex Runciman, WIC Director (x7-3711), is available to meet with individual faculty or departments to discuss WIC concerns.

This term the WIC program will be offering a five week faculty seminar as well as a number of one hour workshops. The seminar, which will meet Tuesdays, 3-5pm, beginning Oct. 16,

will give selected faculty the opportunity to focus intensively on teaching with writing. Participants will finish the seminar with well developed plans for revising a course or designing a new one.

Departments with faculty completing the seminar will be able to draw up to \$250.00 per participant from the WIC budget to support travel requests, book or equipment purchases, or the like. Departments are limited to two seminar participants per term, and participants must be nominated by department chairs by October 9th. For further information, call the WIC office, x7-2930.

Adapted from the July 9, 1990 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Chemistry professor Henry H. Bauer encourages students in his introductory course to pose "perceptive and ingenious" questions based on material covered in class lectures. Mr. Bauer says it is almost impossible to get freshmen to speak up in class, so he has them write out their questions and hand them in at the end of the period. Says Bauer, "I believe that if you can get students to think up questions while they are listening, that will make things stick in their minds more easily."

TEACHING-WITH-WRITING WORKSHOPS

In addition to the faculty seminar (see above), the WIC office will offer five one-hour workshops addressing a variety of topics. All workshops meet Wednesday mornings, 8:30-9:30, in Waldo 121. To register, call the WIC office at x7-2930. Here is the list of workshop topics and dates:

"Understanding Writing Intensive Courses"
Meets Oct. 17th; register by Friday, Oct. 12th.

"Using Ungraded Writing"
Meets Oct. 24th; register by Friday, Oct. 19th.

"Designing Formal Writing Assignments"
Meets Oct. 31st; register by Friday, Oct. 26th.

"Encouraging Useful Revision"
Meets Nov. 7th; register by Friday, Nov. 2nd.

"Grading Student Writing"
Meets Nov. 14th; register by Friday, Nov. 9th.

If you've had good success with writing activities, let us know. Send the WIC office (Waldo 125) a copy of your handout or a description of what you've done in your classes. What has worked for you may work for others as well. Look for such examples in future issues of *Teaching with Writing*.