

TEACHING WITH WRITING

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An Interview with Sally Davenport

By August Baunach for the WIC program

This is the second of three interviews with OSU faculty who've participated in the Writing Intensive Curriculum (WIC) seminars offered through the Center for Writing and Learning. The following interview is with Dr. Sally Davenport, an assistant professor in the Political Science Department—Davenport has been at OSU since 1990. The soon-to-be-designated WIC course that she teaches is PS 473, Public Administration.

WIC: Winter term last year, you participated in the WIC seminar, right? Do you remember what prompted you to sign up for it?

Davenport: I was prompted by my chair, Jim Foster (*laughs*)! That term I had no scheduling conflict, and he was encouraging everyone in the department to take the course.

WIC: But you also had a personal interest in teaching with writing?

Davenport: Yes, very much. I've always felt that students really don't understand a concept unless they can communicate it through writing. In my classes I've always encouraged lots of writing. But I knew that the WIC philosophy involved more than just "lots of writing"—I was curious about other methods.

WIC: Did the WIC seminar have an impact

on the way you teach your course?

Davenport: The seminar helped me to understand that writing is a process, not just an end result. That means that in order to teach with writing, you have to react and respond—give feedback to students *while* they're producing some kind of final product.

Additionally, writing-as-a-process means that students can increase their understanding just by putting their thoughts on paper. Not all of their writing assignments require feedback from me—so it's legitimate for students to write for their own purposes, and not to require any feedback. That part of the WIC philosophy was very difficult for me to believe; before the seminar, I always wanted to give some kind of feedback for every writing assignment.

After using some of the WIC methods, I'm certain that students writing ungraded responses are better off than students taking notes during a lecture. There will be students who don't really try, of course, but for those who do try and are interested, ungraded writing responses can help them to better understand course material.

WIC: So you think students can learn more by writing ungraded responses than by taking lecture notes?

Davenport: Yes, because they're forced to think. Often, taking notes is simply just recording words, but if you ask somebody to summarize, they'll have to do something in the way of thinking.

There are several ways that we can use writing in class, and I don't think any one method is the best. That's really what I learned in the WIC seminar: There are a variety of methods for teaching with writing, and any part of the total package can be helpful for students.

WIC: What types of writing do you use in your Public Administration course?

Davenport: Essentially, the course is a series of eight cases. The students work in groups and discuss their ideas—the importance of each case and what's going on. Then I give them written instructions and ask them to write three-page briefs. We have class discussions and I go around to the small group discussions, but there is no lecturing.

WIC: Your writing assignments are limited, then, to three pages?

Davenport: Yes. In my field, public administration, we try to get people to write short, tight memos. Other courses in this department require students to write longer papers; and I think writing longer papers can be a valuable experience. But I also think that much can be learned through short writing assignments. My students often agonize more over the shorter assignments than they do

over longer assignments. When they write, I really want to force them to come to the point right away, not write around it.

Coming to the point is very hard, and that is where writing goes hand-in-hand with critical thinking. It's easier for most students to develop, expand, and elaborate than to get to the point.

WIC: How many students are in your course?

Davenport: Forty.

WIC: Eight sets of forty papers each is a lot to grade. Do their peers respond to drafts?

Davenport: There weren't supposed to be forty students enrolled, but there are. Over-enrollment becomes a problem in a WIC course—and I haven't figured out what to do about it. It's a lot of work.

The students read one another's summaries and make written comments using an evaluation sheet. And if students aren't happy with the response they get in class, I send them to the Writing Center—or have them find a reader of their choice to fill out the evaluation form.

I ask the students what they think would be most helpful on the evaluation sheets—I've changed the form several times.

WIC: And this process of group discussion, peer review of drafts, and handing in final drafts is repeated eight times over the course of the term?

Davenport: [*Nods*] And I tell them that each time my standards will get more rigorous and that they have eight times to practice the same format.

WIC: What do the students think about all this writing? Do they mind the ungraded assignments?

Davenport: We're trying to get across public administration concepts—as well as writing concepts—in this course. And that's often frustrating for students, because they only want to know about public administration. One girl told me, "Oh, I'm not learning anything in this class! I'm so busy thinking about writing that I can't learn anything!" I asked her if she understood what she'd just said. . . .

Sometimes the groups have a hard time figuring out what a case is about, what the point is. And they'll ask me: "What do you want us to say about this case? What is this case?" So I ask them to discuss the situation for a minute and then write down what they think are the three most important things about the case.

Sometimes I'll collect such impromptu writing just to keep them on their toes, but most of the time it's used as a basis for discussion. And I'll say, "Okay, what did you come up with?" And we'll put it up on the board, and others will agree or disagree. And just the act of writing something down will often allow them to think enough about the case so that they have more to contribute.

I think the best class session I ever had—where I got the most participation from students—involved an evaluation of the course. We were discussing a Total Quality Management—TQC—case and managers who don't listen to people who work for

them. One of the reasons that managers typically act this way—or so the argument goes—is that they don't want to take any guff from the people who work under them—people who are unhappy because *they* aren't managers!

I was talking about several ways managers could get feedback from those they supervise. The most productive way is probably for the manager to deal with those being supervised on an individual basis—otherwise the group tends to gang-up on the manager. That's a common group dynamic.

And so I said to the class: "Okay, let's examine this idea. Suppose you think of me as a manager you work for, and I'd like to get some feedback. Let's evaluate this course: you tell me how things are going—whether they should they be changed."

Whoa! Did they ever jump on that. I asked everybody to write down three things that were the best things about the course and three things that were the *worst* things about the course. I told them, even though they might be tempted, to please phrase their comments so that they weren't personally insulting to me!

I asked them to comment on the relatively undirected way that we write briefs for the cases studies. And then I said I'd take individual points and write them on the blackboard: "No discussion or anything; let's just see if we can't get some good information."

After a minute or two I started calling on them. First I put all the good things up, and

then we started on the worst things. We didn't make it very far into the second list, but I noticed that opinions were divided—the same things were on both lists.

The situation got so emotional that they started talking—shouting—out of turn: "Yeah, that's right! How can you write anything if you don't know the subject! How can you write about something you've never been taught in lecture!" They were arguing among themselves. Then one student in the back raised his hand: "Is this an example of 'ganging-up' on the manager?"

They all got worried and thought I'd be devastated by their outburst. But I said: "How better to explain to you how difficult it is for a manager to open up to a lot of feedback. I wish I could demonstrate every point as easily."

WIC: Before you adopted the WIC methods for your class, did you assign longer papers with no drafts?

Davenport: The papers were longer, probably five to eight pages, but they came in at the end of the term. And afterwards, most of them weren't picked up by the students.

WIC: Now they're more interested in your response to their written work?

Davenport: Very interested—this is the first time I've regularly had students in my office talking to me. That's why I say a WIC course is a lot of work—and these students are often angry. They think it's not fair that they should have to generate some ideas.

I don't go back into the lecture mode, but when they're frustrated I get in the groups

and give them lots of hints as to what should be in their case analysis. I would really like to emphasize for this interview that, for the teacher, teaching a WIC course is also an on-going process of learning how to teach writing—of learning how to teach critical thinking. It's not an easy thing to do, but you get a feel for it and you get a repertoire of things that might work. And they don't work with every student. And they don't work all the time. You can't lapse into: "Oh, I've got my technique perfected; I'll just apply it."

I've gained some experience teaching with writing, and I know how hard learning is. I recognize how little probably took place before—because of the intense reaction you get when you really make people struggle. It hurts. And it's not easy when they tell you: "I don't know why I have to take this—I'm not learning anything in this class." Because, of course, there's really no way to be sure they are learning! All I know is that the briefs were better at the end.

I knew that teaching with writing would be difficult; but I'm still very much interested in continuing to teach this way. I used to get these feelings when I would walk into a classroom—like nothing's going on and why even go through the motions of giving lectures? Somewhere in your heart you know that learning is not as easy as just listening to words.

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