

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

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Pre/Views

By Vicki Collins, WIC Director

The WIC Department Development Grants for 1998 are announced on the back page of this issue. The grants reflect a trend in writing across the curriculum at Oregon State: departments across the university are enthusiastically designing writing guides for students in their departments and thinking deeply about how to integrate writing throughout their curriculum. These projects signify a level of self-reflection about writing in the disciplines that is breaking new ground in the field.

Have you wondered how to teach students to evaluate web sources or how to detect papers that have been plagiarized from web sites? Helpful information gleaned from this spring's lunch seminar series "Eating-to-Learn" is included in "Web-Wise Resources for Teachers and Students" in this issue.

From the electronic to the personal, you will want to read student Sue McGrory's narrative of her experience as a writer, ranging from the time that her left arm was tied behind her to break her of left-handedness, through years of writer's block, to her positive experiences in the OSU Writing Center. This excerpt is part

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Left-handed, Bound, and Blocked

By Sue McGrory (MA--English)

My first memory of being a writer brings with it the touch of Mrs. Sadring's cool, soft skin as her hand gently guides mine over the rough, tan-colored paper of my writing tablet. The faint scent of lavender, her perfume, touches this scene--one of my first days in kindergarten--more than thirty years ago. My writing process at that time was tightly intertwined with the physical elements of the act itself: the pencil, the paper, and the position of the page on the desk were all important to me. Since I was left-handed, these elements also represented a difference from other students, but I never felt "different." My kindergarten teacher acknowledged and accepted that hand preference, thus allowing me to learn to write with a straight hand, not turning my wrist inside or writing the letters "backwards" as I applied them to the page. I memorized and practiced and scribbled, over and over, wanting to improve my letters, wanting to please my teacher.

And I did. In fact, I pleased all my teachers with my penmanship, back in the days when rote and drill were *the* most important aspects of student writing. My fellow students and I never heard about "process" and "freewriting" when I was in grade school or even high school. We filled in blanks on tests, copied paragraphs and poems, and practiced "penmanship." And I excelled at these activities--until I was ten years old.

When I entered sixth grade, my teacher told me that it was a "right-handed world," and that I had to change if I wanted to succeed. She then proceeded to tie my left hand behind my back each day at the start of school. I was not alone in this "experiment": five other students were also "restrained." The first full day of my "new" life, I noticed that two of my fellow former lefties were writing well with their right hands, and two others

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were clumsily trying to comply with the teacher's orders. However, two of us were stymied. I never discussed my experience with the other students: I was too ashamed. I simply could not make my hand produce the letters I had learned years earlier, and I could not make my hand convey my thoughts to the page. Indeed, my thoughts seemed to be frozen within my head--which was clearly detached from my right hand!

The teacher said I was "just being stubborn," but after two weeks, and a grade drop from straight A to straight F, my mother called the principal--and I was freed! The teacher never mentioned my "inappropriate" left-handedness again, but the damage had been done: something had become skewed, blocked in my writing process. I was back to excelling in grades and activities, but writing had become something that could punish me.

Even though I don't believe my teacher (whose name still gives me shivers) wanted to "punish" me, I do think she wanted to "correct" what she assumed to be a problem, a flaw. Looking back on this episode, I see resonances which evoke Foucault's explanation of the hegemonic practices of literacy: to homogenize, normalize, etc.--through the disciplining of the body, mind, and performance within the institutional settings of the school. My teacher was acting on the assumption that it was her duty--and her privilege, since she was in control--to re-create me into an appropriate (read "correct") image by whatever means necessary, violent or otherwise.

In the early 1970's, very few universities had writing courses beyond the freshman level, and even fewer had full-blown Composition departments. Today, most English Departments create some kind of writing curriculum for their students or Composition major, but my professors acted as if, since we were English majors, we students were somehow imbued with the magical ability to produce articulate papers of literary criticism--without ever being taught how to do this! The professors assumed we knew how to research and compose the lengthy, scholarly papers they would assign. But they never asked us if we knew how to document our sources, select appropriate sources--or even use the library's catalog. Somehow, between high school and college, we were supposed to automatically transcend to a new level: the university level writer, producing perfectly punctuated, footnoted papers--on com-

mand. Consequently, many of us floundered, trying to understand, trying to "do it right," but not succeeding. Since the professors had been "trained" in this "traditional" way through their university years, they assumed it would work for us. This kind of thinking still occurs today, but with the increase and prominence of Composition programs, some of those old paradigms of "It-was-good-enough-for-me" are fading.

After my senior year, I left college without a degree, but with about 30 semester hours of "Incomplete"--and a tremendous case of "Writer's Block." I later enrolled in nursing school, and for fifteen years, I worked as a Registered Nurse, writing in short, staccato documentation forms.

Then the chance came for me to go back to school and finish what I had started. I can recall a distinct sensation of joy mixed with panic at the thought of returning to an English department, but I knew that I still wanted to be an English teacher.

I had returned to school after twenty years away, and I was facing the dreaded writing monster again; anxiety-ridden and tearful, I waited for my appointment at the OSU Writing Center to begin. Jon Olson walked up to me soon after I came in, and we sat on one of the sofas in the waiting area and talked. I told him about my past--negative--experiences in writing and my current situation. Jon listened attentively and then spoke in soft, calm, reassuring tones: encouraging me to think of writing as a process, explaining the parts of the process--and assuring me that I could do it! He also explained how the Writing Center was there to "help" students just like me.

At the Writing Center, students learn that they are *all* writers. Not everyone is the "Great American Novelist," but they are capable of writing papers. The Writing Center staff works from a few baseline assumptions: first, that the writer "owns" the paper, and thus, the writer is ultimately responsible for what goes on in the paper; second, that writing is a collaborative process, best accomplished with feedback; and third, and most importantly, that writing itself is a process, which includes revision, not perfection. Not a remedial center as much as a place for support and *assistance*: the people who work there are not Writing Tutors--they're Writing Assistants, helping writers overcome "blocks," answering questions about form and style, and listening and responding to the writer's text. He also explained

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WEB-Wise Resources for Teachers and Students

By Vicki Collins

For faculty who teach writing intensive curriculum (WIC) courses, or any courses which require students to do research, this might well be called the year of the internet. As more and more students use the web to gather information and prepare writing assignments, faculty are faced with new challenges and the need for new teaching strategies. The two best attended WIC Lunch Seminars in program history were our April meetings, with the topics "What shall we teach students about evaluating internet sources?" and "What shall we teach students about email and discipline-related online discussions?"

In case you missed the WIC spring seminars, here are some web sites which will be helpful to you and your students in using electronic sources. If you only have time to check out one, be sure to look at the Widener University site.

<http://www.science.widener.edu/~withers/webeval.htm> "Evaluating Web Resources" by Widener University, Wolfgram Memorial Library, Chester PA.. Classifies web sites as advocacy sites, news sites, business/marketing sites, information sites, and personal home pages. For each type of web page, students are instructed in how to evaluate the site for authority, accuracy, objectivity, currency, and coverage. (This is the best web site I have seen on evaluating sources.)

<http://www.osu.orst.edu/dept/isteach/class/engines.htm> "Getting the Most Out of Internet Search Engines" by OSU librarians Jeanne Davidson and Cheryl Middleton. Discusses the characteristics and functions of search engines, information often overlooked, advanced search features, "false drops," and sources of additional information on search engines; also distinguishes between search engines and bibliographic databases.

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how the Writing Center was there to "help" students just like me.

Those appointments did help me: they transformed my attitude and my writing. Now I give myself permission to participate in the process--and lots of revising. And guess what!? I'm even working as one of those Writing Assistants, helping other people get comfortable with their writing.

[Sue is finishing her MA thesis on James Joyce this spring before beginning the Language Arts teaching licensure program at OSU in the Fall.]

<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/instruct/critical.htm> "Thinking Critically about World Wide Web Resources" by Esther Grassian, UCLA College Library. Instructs students on how to check a web site for content, value, source, currency, and structure.

<http://www.osu.orst.edu/dept/library/refhelp.htm> "Help from the Reference Librarians" by Mary Swanson, OSU Libraries. This page links students to subject information sheets, assignment pages for specific courses, and a number of other helpful sites.

<http://www.alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/~janicke/plagiarism.htm> "Cut-and-Paste Plagiarism: Preventing, Detecting and Tracking Online Plagiarism" by Lisa Hinchliffe. Defines plagiarism and suggests strategies for preventing, detecting, and tracking down plagiarism. Lists web sites where students can obtain plagiarized papers, for example School Sucks, Other People's Papers, Evil House of Cheat. Faculty may want to look at what is available out there.

About *Teaching With Writing*

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Teaching With Writing is the newsletter of the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program. As part of the Baccalaureate Core, all OSU students are required to take an upper division writing intensive course in their major.

The content of the WIC courses ranges from radiation safety (for Nuclear Engineering majors) to golf courses design (a Horticulture option). While subject matter differs by department, all WIC courses share certain commonalities defined by the Faculty Senate:

*Informal, ungraded or minimally graded writing is used as a mode of learning the content material.

*Students are introduced to conventions and practices of writing in their discipline, including the use of borrowed information.

*Students complete at least 5000 words of writing, of which at least 2000 words are in polished, formal assignments.

*Students are guided through the whole writing process, receive feedback on drafts, and have opportunities to revise.

For complete information on WIC guidelines, contact Vicki Collins by email at VCollins@orst.edu or consult the OSU Curricular Procedures Handbook.

WIC Grants Announced

The following departments have been awarded WIC Department Development Grants this spring.

Department of Exercise and Sport Science
Anthony Wilcox, Proposer.

Goals: To develop a student writing guide for the significant forms of writing utilized in EXSS courses; and to conduct a faculty retreat to discuss the writing guide and plan for implementation in the curriculum.

Department of Geosciences
Bob Lillie, Proposer

Goal: To support travel to a national conference for the proposer's presentation of the sequential writing assignments he has designed for his WIC course.

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences
Geraldine Olson and Alexis Walker, Proposers

Goals: To continue departmental curriculum revision by identifying and incorporating writing skills, exercises, and assignments that will enhance student learning throughout the curriculum and prepare students for writing as professionals in the field after graduation; and to develop a departmental writing guide for students which addresses writing issues as they occur in the major.

Department of Philosophy
Courtney Campbell, Jon Dorbolo, Kathleen Moore, Jeff Ramsey, and William Uzgalis, Proposers

Goals: To design and implement an online version of

Writing Philosophy Papers: A Student Guide, including interactive elements and links to specific courses and further materials that would help students apply the writing guide in their own class work; and to hold a faculty retreat to train faculty in ways to integrate the online writing guide into their particular courses.

Department of Sociology
Dwaine Plaza and Mark Edwards, Proposers

Goals: To hold a series of departmental retreats/workshops which will facilitate faculty discussion of using writing throughout the Sociology curriculum and then progress to the development of a writing handbook for students enrolled as majors and minors in the department.

Department of Speech Communication
Judy Bowker, Proposer

Goals: To design a new writing guide for the department which incorporates elements of an earlier version of the departmental guide, guides developed by individual faculty, and new elements and examples as needed; and to construct a departmental Writing Web Site for use by students at all levels.

First Year Experience Program, Academic Affairs
Jackie Balzer, Proposer

Goals: To increase the use of writing activities in the university orientation course for first year students, ALS 111, OSU Odyssey, through developing a chapter for the Faculty Resource Notebook on writing activities to be incorporated in the course.

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of an essay Sue wrote when enrolled in WR 511, Writing for Teachers.

And now a heads-up for Fall 1998: I am accepting nominations from department chairs for faculty who wish to participate in the WIC Introductory Seminar in the fall. Six nominations have already been

received, so don't delay. Last fall the seminar was nearly full before September reminders were published. The seminar meets five Wednesday afternoons from 3 to 5 pm beginning October 14. Those who complete the seminar receive a modest honorarium.