

# From the Writing Desk

## Writing Across the Curriculum at Hostos Community College

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Putting WAC into Practice

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### Online and Writing Intensive: A “Perfect Fit” for CUNY Students

*By John Sorrentino*

At the Fall 2004 CUNY IT conference held at John Jay College this past November, I had the opportunity, along with a team of professors from Hostos, to present on a panel where we discussed Writing Intensive (WI) courses in the online environment. Our goal was to demonstrate how the online WI, in addition to being especially suited to enhancing students’ writing proficiency, was a “perfect fit” for the busy CUNY student who is juggling family and work schedules. Our approach was pedagogical in its intent, but at the same time it showcased how the Blackboard software provides and supports an effective environment for online writing.

One major tenet of WAC is that when students use writing in the classroom, they are not only enhancing their writing abilities, they are also learning the rhetoric of the discipline, how to organize their thoughts and how to increase their knowledge of the subject matter. Since participation in an online course requires a good deal of student writing, it seemed logical to us that online courses, whether they be merely web-enhanced, hybrid (where the class meets periodically face-to-face) or asynchronous (where the class is entirely online), could be tailored to meet the Hostos WI guidelines, which require the use of both formal and informal writing assignments. The question was how to make the most of the Blackboard environment so that a WI course could be created and maintained. For Professor Magda Vasillov, the answer lay in the heart of the online classroom: the discussion boards.

Professor Vasillov teaches two asynchronous art courses in the Department of Humanities, one of which, *Modern Art in the City*, I assisted in creating. The course makes the most of online technology through the use of external links to museum sites and online galleries, through the availability of course materials directly via the “Course Documents” button and through the use of the “Digital Drop-Box” where students can submit both their formal and informal assignments. But arguably the most important feature is the discussion boards, where the professor has the opportunity to inspire and encourage the online conversation. Professor Vasillov’s strategy was to carefully craft the discussion questions in such a way that student’s participation (in writing, of course) would develop into a series of “scaffolded” steps  
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### Meet the 2004/2005 Hostos WAC Team



**Standing:** John Sorrentino, Andrea Fabrizio, Dr. Linda Hirsch, WAC Coordinator, H. Alexander Welcome, Jennifer Samet, Alejandro Quintana. **Seated:** LeRon Brooks. **Kneeling:** David Tenenbaum

### Writing Across the Curriculum in Spanish

*By Alejandro Quintana*

Hostos Community College is the only bilingual college in the CUNY system. This uniqueness represents a pride, but also a challenge for Hostos. A large number of its Spanish-speaking students have limited English proficiency and are unfamiliar with educational practices particular to the U.S. They need help to develop the literacy levels expected to succeed as college graduates in America.

As most professors at Hostos know, writing problems are not limited to their Spanish-speaking students. To help improve student writing proficiencies, CUNY has joined an international literacy movement known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). One important aspect of this movement is “writing to *think*”: teaching students to use writing to improve the way they understand and analyze information. To help a larger number of students, Hostos is implementing WAC in Spanish-language courses across disciplines and has allocated a Writing Fellow fluent in Spanish specifically to work with faculty teaching in Spanish. For the past two years I have been that Fellow.

I have spent enough time studying and teaching in Latin American and U.S. colleges to appreciate distinctive differences between U.S. and Latin American college education. Spanish-speaking students educated in Latin America tend to write in a  
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# Informal Writing Assignments: A Space of Academic Development and Intellectual Reflection

By H. Alexander Welcome

The questions of “What do students need to do to write a paper?” and “How do papers get written?” are questions fundamental to WAC. When one thinks of the things that need to be at the disposal of students, such as space for self-reflection to supplement the writing process, one realizes that informal writing serves many of these demands. An examination of the development from informal to formal writing assignment in Hostos Community College’s Dental Hygiene Department proves this point.

The “Oral Anatomy and Physiology Class” is one of the core classes in the Dental Hygiene program. It is taken in the Fall Semester by first year students in the Dental Hygiene program. The class is split into

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two parts. The lecture part of the class, which meets for three hours every week, deals with the theoretical aspects of oral anatomy. The lab section of the class, which meets for one-and-a-half hours every week, deals with the dynamics of identifying teeth in clinical situations.

With the burden of internalizing theoretical knowledge, students taking

this class are expected to retain facts about dental anatomy: what dental anatomy consists of and the relationships between the various components of dental anatomy. The writing assignments in this class have been constructed to help students accomplish this goal.

One of the formal writing assignments in this class charges each student with creating a presentation about a specific tooth. The presentations are geared towards hypothetical 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year high-school students who, unlike first-year students in Hostos’ Dental Hygiene program, do not have a detailed understanding of the classification of teeth. To create this presentation, the students have to list a number of things, including, but not limited to the tooth’s location in the mouth, the specific function of the tooth, and all anatomical aspects of the tooth.

With the goal of making this information understandable to individuals who have less of an understanding (in comparison to Dental Hygiene students) of oral anatomy, the student is transformed. No longer is she an information receptacle. Nor, is she a passive learner, taking in and regurgitating information. With this assignment, the student must master and articulate a sub-section of the oral anatomy literature. The underlying premise of this assignment to students is that the ability to articulate information clearly to those who have less and/or

different knowledge than that possessed by the speaker, demands a superior understanding of the material.

This “superior understanding of the material” is what educators wish to see when they examine a student’s paper. How can this superior understanding happen? How does a paper reflecting a superior understanding of the material get written? With informal writing, one witnesses the creation of a space where an advanced understanding of academic material can develop.

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## The “Situation” as a Means to Employ Critical Thinking

By LeRonn Brooks

As I entered the Radiology Department office, Professor Drago greeted me with a handshake and a wide and earnest smile. I was introduced to him by WAC Coordinator Linda Hirsch the week before, and my still budding impression of Professor Drago was that he was a sincerely gregarious yet self-effacing man, who spoke to everyone, and was as comfortable telling jokes as he was being the subject of them. Because of these qualities his students admired him; they knew that beyond his knowledge of physics and anatomy, his example, his way with people, was of equal importance. As future Radiologists they would one day have to negotiate traumatic workplace situations on a daily basis. His students, therefore, had a clearly observable admiration for him and his know-how.

With a cheerful introduction, Professor Drago ushered me into the office of department chair, Professor Ruiz. During the previous semester Professor Ruiz had worked with another Writing Fellow to develop the WI syllabus for the *Professional Practice Issues in Diagnostic Imaging* course that Professor Drago would now be teaching. Though Professor Drago had shared in these discussions

**The goal was to find a way to enhance the syllabus with Professor Drago’s personality and experience, while keeping all of the approved Writing Intensive elements intact.**

and attended WAC workshops, this was his first semester teaching this course and moreover, this was my first semester as a Writing Fellow. I was admittedly nervous, but from the beginning we both understood that one important challenge in teaching this writing-enhanced course was to adapt Professor Ruiz’s syllabus to fit Professor Drago’s teaching style. Classroom observations were an important part of the process.

Because of the challenges involved in inheriting another’s course and syllabus, we both understood that without the proper instructor to help the syllabus develop the right personality, it could be extremely boring and ineffective; the goal was to find a way to enhance the syllabus with Professor Drago’s

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## FEATURE: WHAT IS INVOLVED IN MAKING YOUR CLASS WRITING INTENSIVE?

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### What Makes a Class Writing Intensive?

*By Andrea Fabrizio and Crystal Benedicks*

What sets a Writing Intensive (WI) course apart from other courses is not necessarily the quantity of writing. Though WI courses call for a greater number of writing assignments, it is the quality of these assignments that ensures their effectiveness. WI courses are notable because they enable students to learn course content and to become familiar with the language of their discipline.

Writing assignments are not meant to be stumbling blocks for students, or hoops through which we expect them to jump. Nor are they simply designed to test whether or not the student has learned the course material. A good writing assignment asks the student to approach a concept or problem by thinking critically. A good writing assignment often also provides an opportunity for student and teacher to share ideas and different scholarly approaches through the revision process.

A research paper is a great way for students to learn about an issue and thoroughly analyze it, but if a

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student is left to choose a topic, conduct research, and write a paper without any feedback along the way from the instructor, chances are, the finished product will disappoint both student and teacher. Scaffolding (the breaking of an assignment into stages that build on one another) combined with the opportunity to revise,

allow student and teacher to exchange information and knowledge throughout the writing process. By requiring outlines, reference lists, and drafts to be turned in before the final paper, the professor suggests ways to build on knowledge as it is acquired, thereby participating in the students' learning process.

Formal papers are only one way WI courses engage students in the learning process; less formal writing assignments such as journals, thought questions, and free writing can also be used to enhance the learning process. These writing to learn activities give students frequent writing practice and allow them to reflect critically on the subject matter as the class unfolds.

It is expected that through these intensive, meaningful opportunities for writing, students will be able to become better writers and communicators, skills highly valued both in college and in the job market. To that end, another unique aspect of a WI course is that it involves discipline-specific writing. Moreover, writing can be used to hone skills that will

be used in specific careers. While developing a WI course, professors are encouraged to develop assignments that involve the type of writing the students will use in their fields or the work place. Students studying the social sciences would benefit from an assignment that asked them to conduct and write a case study. Radiologic Technology students and students working in the sciences could better prepare for their careers by writing lab reports, while nursing students might find it useful to write patient care plans. Students in theatre classes would learn to **(continued on page 6)**

### The "Writing Intensive" Approval Process

*By David Tenenbaum*

Many professors have questions about the WI approval process, and we would like to take this opportunity to clarify some aspects of this relatively straightforward procedure. A Writing Fellow can assist you in this process, helping you modify and pilot assignments as your course is developed as a WI.

The first step is the creation of a WI portfolio, which consists of the WI Checklist followed by the course syllabus and samples of your formal and informal assignments. The most important aspect of a WI syllabus is that it gives a thorough overview of how writing is to be incorporated into the class. The syllabus should include a course outline that lays out the points or weeks in the semester that writing assignments will be implemented. It also presents detailed descriptions of both low and high stakes assignments as well as the writing that will be required on midterms and final exams, if applicable. The example assignments that accompany the syllabus should be clearly laid out and should provide the students with as much background information as possible. Final paper assignments should be broken down into stages and clearly illustrate the opportunities that students will have for feedback and revision.

After you have finished developing the assignments to meet the Hostos Writing Intensive Guidelines, simply forward the completed WI Checklist as well as copies of your syllabus plus assignments to designated members of the WI Task Force a week before the Task Force meeting. The WI Checklist is a brief summary of the writing assignments you will be using in your course plus a brief account of the extent to which your class will utilize these exercises. The WI Task Force consists of a group of Hostos faculty who have already been through the WI approval process and are aware of the challenges faced in creating WI courses. Many faculty have enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the work that they have been doing in this informal setting and have also found the comments of the Task Force quite helpful.

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## *Online and Writing Intensive (continued from page 1)*

toward the writing assignments. At the conference, we demonstrated how one such discussion topic in the course segment entitled "War in the City" sparked creative responses from the students, where they not only responded to the professor's question, "Is it appropriate for artists to show us, in such graphic detail, the horrors of war?" but also to *each other's* responses as well. As the discussion progressed and students reacted to different works of art, their responses began to resemble mini-essays, where students compared and contrasted, took sides, praised the artists, and praised each other. For example, when one student discussed his feelings on art as social protest ("[...] without these courageous artist [sic], many of us would remain blind to what is happening around us."), it was met with a series of replies and challenges, which included phrases such as, "wow, that is a very important point [...]" and "but what about [...]?" The students built on each other's ideas, expanding on the topic with images of discrimination, segregation and racism. The online conversation was spirited as students freely expressed their thoughts, both agreeing and (respectfully) disagreeing with their classmates in a positive learning environment.

Later in that same discussion, Professor Vasillov presented two photographs under the theme of "Lamenting Death." One was a black and white depiction of a dying soldier, the other was a full color photograph taken September 11, 2001 of several firemen carrying the body of Father Mychael Judge. She posed the questions, "What kind of messages do these images give?" and "Do these paintings and photographs intend to make the sacrifices of war easier to accept?" Again, students entered into a discussion where they informed, encouraged and aided each other, one student even going so far as to share her personal connection with the people involved. On the link between art and life, one student aptly concluded: "The people that are dying are ordinary people, people that we know. For example, someone on this discussion board knows Father Judge. That right there is how people that we know are the ones that are killed, our family, our friends. That tells me then that we are the ones that make the sacrifice. We lose a link of our family and possibly the future[...]."

The professor's questions on the boards, and the ensuing discussion, had in effect provided a forum for the students to practice writing their essays. The students in turn enjoyed the opportunity to build an online community, learning from each other as they reflected on their ideas. When the formal essay question was finally posed, the students had already written extensively on the topic and had by now explored several works of art that shared a common theme. The multi-part essay included the following questions: *What is the responsibility of the artist in rendering the reality of war? Should the photographer or painter show the horror and brutality of war? Does the portrayal of violence in art lead to more violence?*

Professor Vasillov's is but one approach to how the

online classroom can work as a successful WI. As we demonstrated, the discussion forums provide an excellent medium for the informal aspect of writing, which stresses the development of students' ideas in a free style, and eventually evolves into more formal academic writing in the form of graded essays and reports. Blackboard can therefore be quite effective as a tool of writing, much like a pen and paper, especially when used imaginatively and deliberately by the professor. A Blackboard online classroom thus has the capacity to work as well as, if not better than, a traditional classroom and lends itself to being adapted to the Hostos WI guidelines with a little guidance and creativity.

## *Informal writing assignments (continued from page 2)*

The first step in this process involves a rough draft in which students begin to sketch the format of their final presentation. A second informal writing assignment in this process calls for the students to examine their rough drafts (right before they hand them in to the professor) and, on a separate sheet of paper, identify the oral anatomy-related terms and phrases in the paper that a freshman or sophomore in high school might have trouble with. With this informal assignment, the student must rethink the terminology that she has become familiar with in terms that can be understood without her expertise.

After having identified phrases that might be problematic for their hypothetical audience, the students now translate these phrases into a language that is accessible to their audience. To do this, students must go further in placing themselves in the role of the audience. As they picked out problematic phrases, the Dental Hygiene students simply needed to identify technical jargon; however, as they attempt to make this scientific language accessible to laypeople, they must think about how they, as Dental Hygiene students, learned the material that is the basis of their hypothetical presentation.

In reflecting on the material to be presented, the student must ask herself what she understands phrases and terms to mean and transform her various background understandings of concepts into a new discourse accessible to her audience. In order to do this she must dissect her understanding: not only of what she thinks, but also of how she has come to think this way. With these two practices: the critique of knowledge and the dissection and re-construction of information, the student has an opportunity to expand her understanding of the material.

In the final draft of a writing assignment, professors expect to see a superior command of the course material. However, the means by which this comprehension is developed can be left to the discretion of the student. With informal writing assignments, professors can construct a space for free intellectual exploration, one of the guiding forces behind academic growth and learning.

### *The Situation (continued from page 2)*

personality and experience, while keeping all of the approved Writing Intensive elements intact. For a Writing Intensive course, therefore, we both started from the position that it is the instructor who has the responsibility of providing a space for students to write themselves into a common language – the junction between the understanding of the language with which they enter the course and the discipline specific language to which they are introduced in the classroom.

A well-organized and well-written syllabus is also a valuable instructional tool by way of *example*—not only for *what* it says but *how* it says what it means. The syllabus is a *tool*—a single instrument amongst others that helps to facilitate the learning process. I would suggest that an equally important tool to help develop meaning is that of the exposition of personal experience. Prior to teaching at Hostos, Professor Drago spent almost two decades working as a professional radiologist. His first-hand knowledge of the field and the course *Professional Practice Issues* were a perfect fit. Professor Drago would relay his experiences to his students as a way to enhance the course material.

In the classroom Professor Drago was an exceptional example of what I have come to call a “situationist.” A situationist, as I define it, is an instructor with the ability to improvise course related material and/or situations in front of his or her class on a moment’s notice. During his lecture Professor Drago would spontaneously intersperse serious yet humorously told experiences as a “Rad Tech” with material from the course textbook. And after each example he would ask his class what they would do if placed in such circumstances. There are cognitive studies that show that we learn in some ways without realizing it. In his role as a “situationist” Professor Drago recognizes that his students learn by linking personal experience with what they already know to new material.

There are two types of writing that are essential to WAC theory: formal and informal. In his classes, Professor Drago emphasized the importance of both types of writing. And as a means for students to employ critical thinking in their assignments, we combined the situationist strategy with the process of developing their final writing projects. The syllabus was scaffolded in sections that emphasized the different parts of a coherent research paper; this scaffolding also emphasized the importance of sustaining the paper’s thesis through argumentation and proper use of citations. The topic of the students’ essays was Euthanasia. Since euthanasia is a highly controversial topic, one with which they’d be faced as medical professionals, many of the students had difficulty deliberating between their personal and moral beliefs and the scientific arguments surrounding the topic, which allow any number of subject positions regardless of one’s spiritual or moral leanings. It was here that situationist practice seemed to be the most helpful. Having had the experience of *imagined* workplace pressure in Professor Drago’s classroom,

and then applying it in informal writing assignments, the students, as I observed in our tutoring sessions, relied heavily on these experiences of having to “walk in the shoes” of others. The imagined workplace stresses which Professor Drago recreated provided students with a critical platform from which to get beyond long-held beliefs and behaviors that may hinder the proper analysis of a given workplace situation. Thus, the situationist framework gave Professor Drago’s radiology students a chance to employ the critical thinking skills that would not only influence possible workplace decisions but would also allow them to meet the more immediate goal of forming proper argumentation.

It was then that I realized his students were actually gaining professional experience through the retelling of a life situation. As a result, in our meetings we began developing other informal assignments related to Professor Drago’s workplace experiences as well as from material in their textbook. Professor Ruiz’s original syllabus did not emphasize the importance of one type of writing over another; however, Professor Drago’s own teaching style lent itself to the informal writing process. Couched therein were important inroads to the writing to learn process that encompassed a multitude of strategies. Thus, when inheriting another’s WI syllabus, it is important to consider the new instructor’s teaching style, and to adapt and apply the tint of his or her individuality.

### *WI Approval Process (continued from page 3)*

In my own experience as a Writing Fellow, the suggestions that this committee has made have all been very constructive and respectful of the integrity of the professor’s original intentions. Even though the Writing Fellow is not always present at the Task Force meeting, you can still count on his/her support at this point in the process. S/he is there to help you proofread and edit the changes suggested by the Task Force to help you prepare your syllabus for the last stage of review.

Upon recommendation by the Writing Intensive Task Force, the next and final step in the process is the College-Wide Curriculum Committee where an official vote is taken to approve a section of a course as WI. Once the section is approved, it goes into the schedule of classes with a WI notation. Only new courses must be approved by the Faculty Senate. WI sections of existing courses are presented to the Senate for informational purposes only.

Though the course is designated as Writing Intensive, once it is approved, the challenge of implementing writing into the course does not end with a completed syllabus. Recognizing the evolving nature of the writing process, faculty and Writing Fellow continue to monitor and revise assignments to ensure that the class maintains the goals established in the initial stages of the course’s development.

**The most important element of a WI syllabus is that it gives a thorough overview of how writing is to be incorporated into the class.**

## *What Makes a Class Writing Intensive*

*(continued from page 3)*

connect the scholarly and performative aspects of theatre by writing a theatre review.

Any professor interested in developing a WI course will usually collaborate with a Writing Fellow to develop and experiment with writing assignments. The Writing Fellow is available to meet with the professor one-on-one, attend classes (if desired), work with students and run in-class workshops. Some recent workshops run by Writing Fellows in various disciplines include "How to Develop a Thesis," "How to Avoid Plagiarism," and "How to Begin Writing." Such workshops prepare students to be better writers and help ease the anxiety many students feel when faced with a writing assignment. Writing Fellows can also help brainstorm ways to integrate discipline-specific writing into the class and, afterwards, they can assist in evaluating the success of a writing assignment.

Perhaps the most valuable facet of the collaborative work between professor and Writing Fellow is the opportunity to have some really engaging conversations about pedagogy. Discussions between Writing Fellows and professors, like many interactions between two people with similar interests in teaching and learning, are often rich and creative. The opportunity to articulate teaching goals, both in terms of specific assignments and the course as a whole, allows for a nuanced, thoughtful approach to designing a course.

When a class becomes Writing Intensive, it does more than just incorporate writing. It joins an interdisciplinary, cross-CUNY vision of learning that emphasizes ongoing innovation and heightened student involvement. Taken as a whole, the CUNY Writing Across the Curriculum Initiative utilizes discipline-specific writing to foster greater student understanding and skill, preparing them not only to be competitive on the job-market, but also to be better life-long communicators and learners.

## *WAC in Spanish (continued from page 1)*

descriptive, narrative form, whereas students educated in the U.S. are expected to write critically in a thesis-based essay form.

Latin American students have shown improvement in developing thesis-centered papers after taking a class that includes WAC activities. For example, at the beginning of last semester, students in an Introduction to Philosophy class were asked to write a two-page paper explaining the problems faced by Latinos in New York City. In a first draft, one student wrote, "*La des-unión [sic] entre los hispanos es unos [sic] de los problemas más sobresalientes. Esa des-unión [sic] es a travez [sic] de que [sic] existen muchos tipos de razas*" (The disunity among Hispanics is one of the most outstanding problems in that community. This disunity is typical of many races). Then she added rather unclearly, "*Pero sino [sic] existirán [sic] esa tiranía [sic] todo fuera tan distinto*" (But, if that tyranny did not exist everything would be much different). The writing, though passionate, was unclear and lacked supportive evidence requiring the

reader to take her word at face value. Instead of simply correcting her grammar, I made comments in her draft suggesting that she focus more on a main idea (thesis) and provide supporting evidence in order to make her statement stronger. In addition, I made a class presentation explaining how to write a thesis-centered essay.

The next draft not only provided supporting evidence, but, by focusing on a main idea, her writing became clearer and showed fewer grammatical errors. In her second essay she formulated a more coherent thesis about prejudice in New York and supported it by describing her own experience of having been passed over for a restaurant job that was given to a white applicant with less experience. This revision still raises significant unaddressed cause-and-effect questions (e.g. Could it have been that English proficiency, for instance, was a factor in the restaurant owner's decision?), but it is clearer and better written. Her first essay lists a series of unsubstantiated assumptions while her second essay, by describing a specific example, makes a stronger argument for the claim she presents in her thesis (i.e. Latinos are discriminated against in New York City).

There is a lot of work that needs to be done to raise students' literacy levels. We are beginning to expand courses implementing WAC in Spanish. Researchers in language development for ESL students believe that knowledge and skills learned in one's native language can be transferred to a second language. One of my students from the Introduction to Philosophy class told me this semester that the techniques learned in our class helped him pass his ACT exam. We can teach students to improve their writing even before they have English-language proficiency. We hope that through the continued integration of WAC practices, students will be able to achieve true bilingualism.

**There is a lot of work that needs to be done to raise students' literacy levels. We are beginning to expand courses implementing WAC in Spanish.**



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