Welcome to the latest edition of From the Writing Desk, the newsletter of the Hostos Writing/Reading (WRAC) Across the Curriculum Initiative. This year’s issue reflects the tremendous strides W/RAC has made at Hostos from its earliest collaborations in 2001 with a handful of faculty to the current participation of thousands of members of the Hostos community in our National Day on Writing celebration. Within these pages you’ll find articles designed to broaden our conversations about W/RAC while providing ways of successfully implementing WAC/RAC practices. Selections include:

1) the unique challenges of creating and implementing WI courses;
2) a field-tested program to help students write thoughtful, plagiarism-free term papers;
3) successful approaches to incorporating writing into math and science courses;
4) faculty views on WAC;
5) excerpts from the “Walls of Writing” established on National Day on Writing.

This marks the tenth year of Hostos’ participation in CUNY’s WAC Initiative. As a college community, we have learned a great deal about helping our students become better writers and readers. Our work together has transformed the way we view writing by underscoring its centrality to all our lives.

We hope you’ll find much to interest you as you read these pages. As always, please contact us if you would like to work with a Writing Fellow or if we can be of any assistance.

Greetings from the WRAC Coordinators

By Dr. Linda Hirsch and Dr. Andrea Fabrizio

The 2009-2010 WRAC Coordinators and Writing Fellows. Pictured (Front, left to right): Andrea Fabrizio (WRAC Co-Coordinator), Adriana Pérez, Elisa Legon. (2nd row, left to right): Linda Hirsch (WRAC Co-Coordinator), Sarah Archino. (3rd row, left to right): Christopher Swift, Mark Alfano, Tudor Protopopescu.
Wall of Writing
By Elisa Legon

The National Council of Teachers of English declared October 20, 2009 the National Day on Writing. To honor and celebrate the diversity of writing at Hostos Community College, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiative organized the Day of Writing on campus. In the lobbies of the A, B, and C buildings, we set up scrolls of paper on the walls and we invited the community at large to write on them. Some people wrote in response to an array of questions, whereas others conveyed unprompted thoughts. We encouraged everyone to write reactions to questions such as “what is your happiest memory?,” “what is the saddest thing that ever happened to you?,” and “if you could change one thing about NYC, what would it be?” After a rather shy reception early in the morning, students, faculty, and staff eagerly joined in throughout the day. The walls were completely filled with statements of faith, poignant personal reflections, and wit, proving that the community has much to express through writing.

Channeling Laurel Ulrich, one student wrote, “Well-behaved women rarely make history!” “Whatever you put in your bowl it will come in your spoon,” added another one. Many people displayed great optimism and joy. “Love does not make the world go round; love is what makes the ride worthwhile,” according to DC. Candace told us that “dreams do come true… Just believe.” CC enthusiastically wrote, “I made it here! I will make it through on time and with honors.” CN is grateful to Hostos: “Thanks HCC for giving me second chance in my life to be a nurse.” Melanie W. does not want people to be misled by her appearance: “I am genuine and sincere… and the beauty on the outside reflects my inside!”

Bearing in mind new technologies of writing, we provided a blog where students, faculty, and staff could respond to prompts, resulting in longer and more carefully structured comments. The array of contributions was remarkable and quite candid. For example, Nicquan N. shared a few of his poems. Elijah G. wrote, “The biggest thing that i want to change in nyc is the sanitation hhabbits such as pollution and littering… I would want to change the thrashy garbage with the horendous odor on the sidewalks that are paling infront of the apart-

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At first glance, any online course might appear to be a Writing Intensive (WI) section. After all, without the presence of face-to-face meetings, the onus lies upon the students’ written communication to demonstrate what they have learned over a semester. However, as in the classroom, conducting a course “virtually” requires more than meeting a minimum word count to function as a Writing Intensive experience. As in a conventional classroom, it takes a variety of different approaches and exercises, creative assignments and attentive feedback to engage students and make their writing experience meaningful.

In working with Prof. Sandy Figueroa’s Computer Literacy class, I have come to understand the complexity of teaching a WI section online. All those “teachable moments” we embrace in a conventional class need careful planning, consideration, and time. The major challenges facing the instructor of such a course are anticipating student challenges and designing writing assignments that will assist them to master the course material.

One of the formal exercises in the Computer Literacy class is an analysis of two research articles that deal with some aspect of the course material. In order help the students complete this task, we first assigned summaries of each article. In a course where the co-requisite is ENG 091, however, these summaries proved challenging for many students. The major temptations were excessive quoting from the original source and responses that were simply student reaction papers. It became clear that the students needed more guidance on writing a summary essay.

The answer to this problem actually came through addressing another challenge facing the online college community. The course website on Blackboard had become onerously text-heavy and we wanted to add some more visual components, including video. The next step presented itself: another step was added to the scaffold of the assignment as we asked students to write a summary of a cartoon. Linking a short, 10-minute Warner Brothers cartoon from YouTube.com to the Blackboard site, students were instructed to write a 1-2 page summary. A seemingly simple assignment, it addressed the two major flaws of student summaries. Without dialogue there was nothing for the students to cite, prompting them to recap the narrative without relying on the original source. Furthermore, concentrating on a simple story helped them learn to differentiate between recounting this narrative and writing a personal reaction.

The challenge then was to lead the students to transfer these skills to the summary of a text. We wanted a way to draw their attention to the traits of these successful essays and help them to enumerate what should (and should not) appear in a summary. We turned to another advantage of the online course, the discussion board. Instead of the weekly question usually posed there, we posted an example of an outstanding student summary. The students were asked to enumerate what the student had done well, what made the essay a successful summary, and what they saw in this example that they could incorporate.

As in the classroom, conducting a course “virtually” requires more than meeting a minimum word count to function as a Writing Intensive experience.
Professors from all disciplines have experienced frustration at the quality of student writing and research. Part of the problem is that instructors often assume that students have a basic understanding (or an innate sense) of how to conduct careful research, structure arguments, and follow formatting standards. But the truth is that many, if not most, do not. Writing a research paper is an enormous challenge, especially for first-year CUNY students. Many of them have never written a paper that incorporates original research and critical thinking skills, and most do not know how to formulate research questions, locate legitimate and appropriate source material, take notes, or cite sources. Students also struggle to write within the boundaries of academic conventions that demand organization, grammar, spelling, syntax, and bibliographic format.

It comes as no surprise, then, that many final drafts are unsatisfactory. Even when the component parts of writing a research paper (writing a thesis, creating a bibliography, outlining, etc.) are assigned separately and in advance of the final draft, students complain about the “extra work” and either muddle through these stages with frustration or skip them altogether. But if these important steps are avoided, many students do not begin work on their term papers until very late in the semester, which results in unorganized, unclear work at best and at worst, plagiarism.

Based on our own experiences as teachers, tutors, and Writing Fellows, we have come to believe that students need a clear, structured, and inspirational set of principles and exercises that will help them navigate the complex process of writing a research paper. We have actually had students ask us directly for a portable set of methodologies they can take with them into a variety of disciplinary settings. In order to address their needs, we set out to create such a program. The eight-week program incorporates seven in-class informal writing exercises, four at-home writing assignments, one full draft, and a final version of the paper. At first glance, this might appear to be an unreasonable amount of additional work or a “distraction” from the main subject matter of the course. However, the program is designed to be completed in brief, straightforward, and manageable stages. Additionally, the exercises can be combined with existing class activities to support disciplinary learning outcomes, ultimately maximizing the use of classroom time. We have found that an investment in short in-class and at-home writing exercises over a period of time results in huge time savings for instructors who would otherwise have to correct seriously flawed papers, as well as for students who would otherwise waste many hours working in an unfocused and unengaged manner.

In building this comprehensive, scaffolded series of assignments, we did not assume any particular skill level of student research and writing, and strove to make each stage of the process engaging and informative for a diversity of backgrounds and levels of experience. We have tried to make...
Incorporating Writing into Math and Science Sections: Bane or Boon?

By Mark Alfano

During the 2009-2010 academic year, I have been a first-time Writing Fellow at Hostos Community College. I’ve had the good luck of collaborating with three different faculty members in Math and Science departments to help them incorporate writing assignments into their syllabi. It might seem on the face of it that the kind of writing characteristic of Writing Intensive sections would not fit well in a science classroom, and that writing and math simply have nothing to do with each other. That appearance is entirely deceiving, as my work with Professors Nelson Nuñez-Rodriguez, Yoel Rodriguez, and Henry Glover has amply demonstrated.

During the Fall 2009 semester, I helped Professor Nuñez-Rodriguez create a staged research assignment assessing the pedagogical value of websites for CHE 220 students. We first identified a couple dozen websites purporting to provide useful information, tutorials, definitions, videos, etc. Students organize into small groups, and each group is asked to rate a handful of the websites in terms of their authority, accuracy, purpose, currency, design, organization, and ease of use. On the basis of these ratings, the groups then write a short paper arguing which of the websites they rated as best. Next, each group examines another group’s assessment and gives feedback. Recommendations are revised in light of this feedback, and then the groups collaborate to choose just a few of the best websites. This assignment integrates writing into students’ thinking about how they learn best, and helps them communicate with each other about the various pedagogical aids available online.

In the Spring 2010 semester, I worked with Professors Yoel Rodriguez on his Physics 210 section and Henry Glover on his MAT 110 section. For the physics section, we designed a series of writing assignments on theoretical notions of position, displacement, distance, velocity, speed, and acceleration. First-time physics students often have trouble understanding the distinctions among these concepts, so we tried to give them a handle on the differences by asking them to describe how they would put a car into various permutations of positive, zero, and negative displacement, velocity, and acceleration. We also asked them to draw time-graphs for each of these scenarios. Afterwards, the students said they felt they had a strong foundation in the basic notions of physics – a sine qua non for their future work on this topic.

For Professor Henry Glover, I crafted a series of

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Assessing Writing Across the Curriculum
By Tudor Protopopescu

In the Fall 2009, semester the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative conducted a survey for faculty teaching Writing Intensive sections. The survey asked for their thoughts on the effectiveness of these classes. For many years now students have been surveyed about their experience in Writing Intensive section. In those surveys, students are overwhelmingly positive about their experience. In particular students say that they felt more engaged, attained greater mastery of the course material, and that their writing improved as a result of taking a Writing Intensive section. To better triangulate the significance of these results, and to gain more perspective on the effectiveness of Writing Intensive sections, all faculty teaching a Writing Intensive section were given a version of the survey students take, asking whether they saw improvements in their students’ writing and level of engagement, as well as a series of questions about the specifics of their class.

As those familiar with Writing Across the Curriculum know, the program is not just about improving writing per se, but about using writing to teach the disciplines. Probably the most distinctive WAC practice for achieving this is the informal, writing-to-learn, assignment. Here faculty were extremely positive about the results of using these assignments.

- Ninety-five percent of faculty agreed or strongly agreed that informal assignments helped students better understand the topic associated with the assignment.
- Ninety percent reported that informal assignments helped students become more interested in the topic.

These results are consistent not only with what students report their experience to be, but also with other evidence of Writing Across the Curriculum effectiveness, such as the higher first time CUNY Proficiency Exam pass rate for students who took Writing Intensive sections. The faculty survey adds the perspective of those who know students best: the faculty who teach them, and they are virtually unanimous in their agreement that the implementation of WAC principles helps students become better learners and writers.

So, do faculty think Writing Intensive sections improve students’ performance overall and writing in particular? The results were overwhelmingly positive. Here are some significant highlights:

- Every faculty member surveyed strongly agreed or agreed that their section improved their students’
  - writing overall;
  - understanding of the topics and concepts of the course;
  - ability to organize and plan their papers before starting to write.
- Ninety-five percent strongly agreed or agreed that their students’ ability to summarize and paraphrase sources improved.
Wall of Writing

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ments.” Deyanira G. expressed how important engaging others is to her. She wrote, “I like to share my life stories with people. I mainly do it through conversation, but also express some of my experiences in poetry, songs, essays, or articles. Through our own stories we learn many of life’s lessons. We all know we are here, but most of us do not know why, and some of us are always looking or wondering.”

The WAC initiative encourages our community to always bear in mind the relevance of writing to our daily lives. We are gathering examples of writing we generated that day, which we look forward to sharing with the community. This way we shall all remember our successful Day on Writing. We suggest that students and faculty continue contributing to this national endeavor: the National Council of Teachers of English is collecting writing from all over the country and has set up a website to gather samples of our writing, which will be archived in the National Gallery of Writing. Go to http://galleryofwriting.org, submit your piece, and read other writers’ compositions. You can share their work beyond the walls of Hostos, thus in a dialogue on the value of writing to convey our thoughts, our ideas, and our personal experiences.

Incorporating Writing into Math & Science

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math-vocabulary assignments. One of the most difficult things for students of mathematics to do is to keep straight all the definitions of the various terms involved. There are dozens, and even the smallest mistake can be disastrous. To address this challenge, we identified the most troublesome vocabulary, asked students to create flashcards for each of the words, and then assigned them several “MathLibs” worksheets. In one version of MathLibs, students are given sentences like, “Since 7 is a factor of 210, 210 is a ____ of 7.” They then fill in the blank with the correct word (in this case, “multiple”). In another version of MathLibs, students are given the words and must create a true sentence relating them all. For instance, if the words are “prime” and “factorable,” one possible sentence is “No prime number is factorable.”

My work with Professors Nuñez-Rodriguez, Rodriguez, and Glover has convinced me that writing deserves a starring role in many of our science and math classes, and that we regard it as a distraction at our peril.

MathLibs:
“Since 7 is a factor of 210, 210 is a ____ of 7.”

WI Online: Challenges and Complexities

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into their own writing. The results were wonderful. Students were able to dissect this summary and pinpoint how the student had conveyed the main idea of the cartoon, in addition to absorbing a model of grammar and style. Not only did they respond to the model, but they also responded to each other’s comments, creating a more successful dialogue than the instructor-led “discussion” most common in a conventional classroom.

Now, as the students move to the article summaries, they take with them a clearer, self-generated understanding of the format of a summary essay. Taking advantage of the resources of the online environment, this assignment made use of Internet resources and the discussion board to help students comprehend the assignment and learn the skills necessary to successfully complete their task.
the research process transparent by presenting the stages of research and writing—from prospectus writing and putting together a bibliography to outlining and revision—as organically linked to one another, believing that this will help students understand more deeply the inherent value of original and accurate research. Three guiding principles have helped us develop a program that addresses the various problems in student writing mentioned above: relevance, purpose, and specificity. Simply put, we believe that original, purposeful writing requires students to maintain a personal and intellectual investment in a specific field of inquiry, as well as a genuine interest in finding answers to relevant questions with informative, practical, or ethical value to the reading audience. Breaking down a complex process into manageable steps transforms a daunting assignment into a significant learning experience. Scaffolding the assignment takes students through the research process, offers opportunities for guidance throughout, and makes it possible for professors to monitor more closely each student’s progress. Peer intervention, instructor feedback, and critical reflection early in the process improves the overall quality of final drafts and provide students with tools they can use throughout their college experience. We have already piloted each exercise of the program with great results. The exercises have helped students discover new avenues of research, think through problems and stumbling blocks, narrow the scopes of their projects, and refine their ideas. We have also observed how the entire eight-week program discourages pedestrian summaries of broad, undefined subjects, unexamined repetition of information (often based on Google searches and encyclopedic sources), and plagiarism. The program was designed to function across the disciplines, and we have encouraged professors to tailor the plan to meet the particular objectives of their course by amending, modifying and supplementing as needed. The program is available in PDF format at: http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/WAC/materials_instruct.htm. The program is available in PDF format at: http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/WAC/materials_instruct.htm.