



WRITING AND READING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM AT HOSTOS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

(L TO R) STEPHEN RUSZCZYK, ANDREA FABRIZIO, EMILY CURTIN, LINDA HIRSCH, ELAN ABRELL, LAURA PASKELL-BROWN, ROBERT CASTLE, MARY HUBBELL

Greetings from the WRAC Coordinators

by Drs. Linda Hirsch & Andrea Fabrizio

Welcome to this Spring 2013 edition of *From the Writing Desk*, the newsletter of the Hostos WAC Initiative. Once again, we are pleased to highlight some of the work done by Fellows and faculty over the past academic year. Their perspectives and experiences apply to many of our classrooms, and we hope you will find information, strategies and reflections that will help shape your own pedagogy into one that continues to provide students with meaningful opportunities to read and write. In addition to thought-provoking articles on student writing, assessing writing, the Writing Center and implementing WAC/RAC strategies, we present an interview with Professor Stefan Bosworth on his experiences as a WAC veteran.

As you know, Fellows are now assigned to campuses for only one year, so we must say good-bye to this dynamic group. They have contributed to the academic life at Hostos in innumerable ways, and we've heard nothing but praise from those of you who've had the

pleasure to work with them. We will miss them, and we know you join us in saying thank you for all they have done.

Check out our updated website, and as always, please contact us if we can be of any assistance.

Changing the Paradigm: Bringing WAC Pedagogy into the College Classroom

by Elan Abrell

"Students just don't want to do work."

"They never turn anything in."

"They don't even seem to care about their grades."

"They're just lazy."

In my last five years teaching as an adjunct at two different CUNY campuses, I have heard these complaints repeatedly in my conversations with colleagues when discussing our undergraduate students. The consensus seems to be that many students just lack motivation. In the last year working as a Writing Fellow in the WAC program at Hostos Community College, however, I have come to

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realize that, as a professor, I bear much of the responsibility for my students' lack of motivation.

Ask many teachers below the college level, and they can tell you that an essential part of teaching is getting a student to engage in the critical thinking process that is essential to learning. It's easy to forget that areas of study that are interesting to us may not be self-evidently as interesting to students who are new to such material. Sure, we can talk at them and assign articles, but if they aren't already attracted to the topic, multiple choice tests and formulaic response papers are unlikely to motivate them to engage with the material beyond what is necessary to pass the class. To teach in a way that motivates students to learn, a more engaging pedagogy is essential.

Throughout my teaching career, I found virtually no resources for pedagogical professional development outside the advice of more experienced colleagues. In addition to the relative dearth of resources, many of us have found that pedagogy is hardly discussed at all in many graduate programs outside education departments. Given this lack of professional support, it's somewhat understandable that professors throw their hands up in despair at their inability to really engage with and motivate students.

But don't despair yet. The WAC approach to teaching provides many engaging pedagogical tools that can help transform our dynamic with seemingly unmotivated students.

Take, for example, a WAC method that can foster a deeper engagement with course materials: the use of low-stakes, informal assignments. Since these assignments are not graded, they provide students with a pressure-free space to explore ideas and think through their potential implications without having to worry about "getting it wrong." Informal assignments can be done in class or as homework, and they can incorporate creative elements, such as imagining events

in a book from the viewpoint of a particular character or historical figure. Bringing in creativity can make the assignments more enjoyable for students while simultaneously encouraging them to think more deeply about issues in their reading.

Another example of WAC pedagogical methods is the idea of building paper revisions into the course syllabus. Several professors I've worked with initially resisted the idea of giving students a second chance to do an assignment they couldn't get right the first time. From the "students are just lazy" perspective, this resistance makes sense: if you give students a do-over, they won't bother to put any effort into the first attempt. However, you can shift your perspective to thinking about revisions as a pedagogical tool to provide the students with a process through which they can develop writing and critical thinking skills. You can create opportunities to engage more deeply and directly with students about how they understand the course material by giving them substantive feedback throughout the process of writing that will help them to think more complexly and articulate those thoughts more clearly. The student's writing process becomes a dialogue between the professor and the student through which the student more deeply engages with the material while also honing critical thinking skills.

A WI is more than a course with more papers to grade. It is an opportunity to engage students, break down walls of student apathy, and foster students' critical thinking. Professors looking for a way to chip down that wall and get at the real students behind it can find many powerful rock-busting tools in the WAC shed.

Writer's Block: How Faculty Can Help Students Conquer the Blank Page

by Laura Paskell-Brown

As a WAC fellow this year I have worked with a host of your students enrolled in different WIs, and have witnessed some of their struggles — struggles that get in the way of meeting deadlines, following your prompt or writing a paper at all. The key point is that these issues are not necessarily the signs of "a bad student," but might instead reflect anxieties and confusions that can be easily overcome, with a little input on your part. My hope is that the following will not only help your students, but will also provide insight that allows you to move through your day with a little more calm and compassion.

Here are some of the students I encountered:

The student who doesn't know her own strengths: She came into the room on the verge of tears, telling me she was thinking of dropping the course. She said she didn't know anything about the subject. She wasn't into it. So I asked her, "Okay, what DO you care about?" As she replied I had to listen carefully, reading between the lines. It turns out that not only was she interested in something directly related, but she was already pretty familiar with the topic. This was a Latin American politics class and her grandfather had been involved in a historically significant event in Peru. She had seen films about it and even had direct access to primary sources; she just hadn't considered any of this as relevant to her schoolwork. By the time she left my office she had a paper topic she felt comfortable and happy with.

The over-anxious student: As he sat down, he placed in front of me the most elaborate paper outline I've ever seen. No wonder he was so overwhelmed. He didn't need me to help him look up articles or to flesh out ideas—he was good

at all that — he needed me to give him permission to do less. To chill out. So we sat and cut at least sixty percent of his plan. Now he had a focused topic he could work on without feeling so anxious. Phew.

The here-to-get-a-grade student: She needed a paper topic. “What are you interested in that could possibly relate to this class?” I asked. She muttered something, unconvinced. After some back-and-forth she felt comfortable enough to come clean with me: not only was she uninterested in the subject matter, she didn’t like reading at all. Her passion was in using her hands; she was a visual and tactile artist, and she needed this class to get where she wanted to go. Rather than judging her, I said I would help her create a passable paper. We went through the textbook and found ways to use it for the assignment. You can help this kind of student by creating really clear prompts, and by giving clear examples of possible topics that students can pick from, rather than leaving it totally open.

TIPS for a less stressful semester:

Try to empathize: Remind yourself of all those classes you took as an undergrad that didn’t interest you. If a student isn’t thrilled to be in your class, don’t label him a bad student, and don’t take it personally. Your subject matter is just not their cup of tea. Try to find ways to let them do the work with as little stress on your part and theirs, so they can move on.

Try to read between the lines: Students are often too shy or scared to tell you what they really feel. The first thing they tell you might not be the issue at all. During office hours, give yourself at least twenty minutes for each student so that you both have the space to have a real conversation. Students will need time to warm up to you before they give you the full story.

Help students activate their prior knowledge: Informal writing, which enables students to tap into their own thoughts and

experiences, is not a waste of time. It can be a crucial step towards activating passion in new areas. Journal writing or even five minutes of free-writing in class are brilliant tools to do this.

Be practical: Whilst writing academic papers is a crucial skill for those going into academia, other settings can require different styles. Look for ways to include writing assignments that will strengthen traditional writing styles while also speaking to other types of writing. Informal writing can be a great way to introduce this. Examples include social media, journalistic writing, blogs or business plans.

For ideas and further information, see our website:

<http://hostos.cuny.edu/wac/>

“It seems to me the most important thing you could learn in college is how to write”

A ten-year WAC veteran shares his experiences of life in the Writing Intensive trenches
by Robert Castle

I interviewed Professor Stefan Bosworth from the Behavioral and Social Sciences Department about his ten-year experience of the Writing Across the Curriculum program at Hostos.

Q: Can you tell me about your first WAC experience? How did you get involved with the WAC program?

A: It was back in 2003, and I developed a Writing Intensive US history course, working together with a Writing Fellow called Andrea [Fabrizio, now WAC coordinator]. “I heard about the program, and thought why don’t I do a Writing Intensive course?” So, I contacted Linda [Hirsch, WAC coordinator]. Linda is always very supportive and

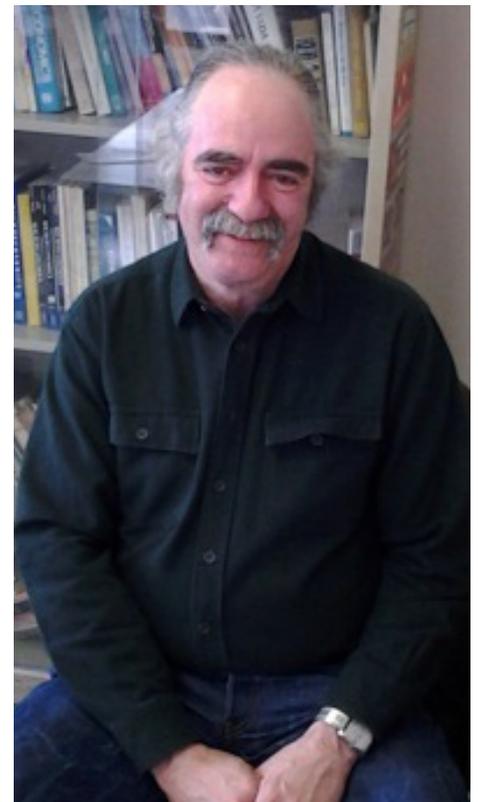
helpful and the program she runs is outstanding.

Q: How many WI courses have you developed?

A: Ten. I estimate I have taught Writing Intensive courses more than 60 times.

Q: Can you tell me more about the process of creating a WI course? How did your first WI lead to so many more?

A: The first experience was fantastic. It’s not only that we wrote a good syllabus — and so much of that had to do with Andrea — but I also then redesigned most of my other syllabi based on what I learned from that experience. The first syllabus took about a semester, and then we moved on to the next history course. I always stressed



writing even before I was doing Writing Intensive, which is probably why I jumped on it. I want all my courses to be Writing Intensive.

Q: Have you always worked with Writing Fellows? How have they helped you?

A: Yes, I always work with Writing Fellows. They range from incredibly good to just plain spectacular.

I've never had a bad experience. They generally say that I am easy to work with, and that I wrote the syllabus, but in reality I've always thought they wrote it and all I did was make comments. They always have insightful comments and helpful ideas that made the syllabus better than I think I could ever have done on my own. Part of the fun of doing these things is having a Writing Fellow. You have a syllabus to write, and you have somebody to work with. You start out with an idea, you put it together and you write a syllabus.

Q: How has being involved with the WAC program changed your teaching?

A: Hopefully I have gotten better at scaffolding assignments and making the students more comfortable with them. Practice makes perfect. I also think that the size of the research paper has gotten a little longer because I have found that students can do a longer paper. The research aspect of essays has also increased. Exams (always essays) are more developed and require more cognitive thinking.

Q: How do you think students benefit from WI courses?

A: The students enjoy them, they have all kinds of different kinds of writing, and they get different kinds of practice. It seems to me that the most important thing you could learn in college, above and beyond anything, is how to write. That's going to really help them when they go out into the real world and look for jobs.

Q: Do you get any feedback from the students about your WI courses?

A: Generally there are two comments, one positive and one honest: the positive one is that I think they find it enjoyable and interesting; the honest one is that they have never worked so hard.

Q: How do you think students feel when they start taking a Writing Intensive course for the first time?

A: I think they feel overwhelmed in the beginning: the look of fear on their faces is significant. But I think because I try to guide them through it, at the end they have a sense of empowerment. They have accomplished what they were sure they wouldn't be able to accomplish, and now they know they can do things that they never thought they could do.

Q: What advice would you give to a new Writing Fellow?

A: You need to work closely with the faculty member. You need to make a judgment as to the person you are working with and what they want from you, and not to be afraid to express your own ideas. Fellows shouldn't take over the project.

Q: What advice would you give to professors who haven't done a Writing Intensive course?

A: Do it. It's a wonderful experience; it's enjoyable to put together; it will improve all your other courses; and it gives the students good experience. You have to be committed to doing a lot of work, because if students are writing a lot of papers, you have to read them. What I have gotten from Writing Intensive has fed into other courses and syllabi. It's a good program. I think it benefits the students; it benefits the faculty; it benefits the college; and it benefits the writing fellows. So, it's a win-win situation.



What Do You Think Goes on in the Writing Center? Think Again!

by Stephen Ruszczyk

Many professors refer their students to the Writing Center and expect they will return with masterful, grammatically-correct essays. Is the Writing Center really a quick fix for student essays? What really goes on there? In order to answer that question, two WAC

Writing Fellows, Emily Curtin and Stephen Ruszczyk, sat down and interviewed its director, Professor Alison Perry, as well as most of the tutors this semester.

When you walk into the Writing Center, located inside the Academic Learning Center on the 5th floor of the C Building, an assistant hands you a paper explaining what the Center can do for you. On the two desktop computers, you can sign up for an hour session with one of the smiling, welcoming tutors. Lining the walls are several laminated posters that describe how a tutor's work is different from an editor's. For example, a tutor will spend time asking students to discuss their thoughts on their writing development and listen, rather than writing lots of red ink about student grammar and telling students what to write (for the full list, see hostos.cuny.edu/oaa/writingcenter).

Setting Students Straight... and Putting Them at Ease

Tutors report that students often walk in with false beliefs about what goes on at the Writing Center. "Students often expect life-savers, and show up the day before their research paper is due," says one veteran tutor. Professors often share the idea that the Writing Center is about product and not about process. The tutors want to emphasize that the Center is a place for students to turn their writing in the right direction, but not a one-stop panacea. A tutor explains how to get a student in the right mindset: "For first-timers, we have the contract-type thing [that clarifies the exchange between students and tutors] that we give them when they come in, and they [learn that they] have to take an active role." At the same time, tutors prioritize "making the student feel comfortable where they're at...and eradicating a stigma [of asking for help]" with "a very welcoming and caring atmosphere."

What Do I Write About?

Students often don't have a clear

idea of what to write. Sometimes students “don’t bring the assignment with them,” sometimes “assignments are not clear enough,” and sometimes there is “miscommunication between what the professor says and what the student understands.” In these situations, the tutor’s most important contribution comes before the student even starts to write, and the session focuses on getting a clear handle of the assignment at hand and how to approach it. Much of the Writing Center traffic comes from students who need assistance with the CAT-W, ESL classes, and other developmental work where the emphasis is sometimes on form more than content. In all these cases, dialogue with tutors helps students to clarify their ideas of what teachers expect.

Tutoring Process

Tutors start by asking students to analyze their own work: “[When students] read [their] work out loud, [they realize that] many errors come from not proofreading after they’re done. You catch a lot of things. Conceptual errors, construction... .” Tutors then begin “pulling out [student] ideas; I ask questions, they answer, so they get to thinking” about a few major points in their writing. It could be essay disorganization, lack of a thesis or a topic sentence, underdeveloped statements, lack of clarity in sentence structure, word choice or grammar and punctuation. To illustrate points, they draw diagrams, use metaphors (such as beads in a necklace to teach transitioning), draw stick figures, use examples from their own writing, and use everyday speech to emphasize different kinds of writing and voice.

One of the core principles of the WAC program is the idea that writing is a process, and there are no “quick fixes.”

Limitations: Language Learning and Next Steps

Tutors report grammar to be a very frequent and difficult area to work on. One tutor reports frustratingly, “Grammar. So the ESL students are demanding about what the rule is, and the tutor is not a grammar expert. There are some grammar sheets, but there are not that many.” When working on grammar in worksheets and in context, time limitations make it difficult to simultaneously workshop writing and reinforce grammar rules. Even for tutors with a strong grasp of grammar rules, it can be difficult: “For example, it’s hard to explain independent clauses, especially to students whose languages I don’t know much about.”

When it comes to grammar and other mechanical questions, it is clear that a long-term process with regular involvement works best. One tutor complained, “I don’t think a lot of students have a plan to go home and [revise]. We’re supposed to write their plan, where we write what their homework is, what is their next step. I ask them, what are you going to do on this at home?” Tutors are often unable to follow student progress over time.

Moving to the Next Level

Professor Alison Perry, director of the Writing Center, has taken some steps to address this last difficulty. In an effort to encourage ongoing relationships with students that reflect the writing process, students now sign up online for an hour session with tutors, and tutors maintain ongoing records of areas of improvement. Students read their paper aloud to the tutor, who identifies three major points on which to comment. The hope is that students can build a relationship with a tutor with whom

they feel comfortable, and improve their writing skills over the course of the semester, or academic year.

The tutors themselves will continue their mission of assisting students through their own professional development – and this is where WAC can help. One of the core principles of the WAC program is the idea that writing is a *process*, and there are no “quick fixes.” We must instill that understanding in students by promoting a culture of writing. WAC Fellows will continue to support the mission of the Writing Center, including leading workshops for tutors on various topics, such as access to ESL resources and responding to student writing. At every level of Writing Center practice, we’re active in the process of improving student writing.

Judging the Women’s History Month Essay Contest: Thoughts on Evaluating Student Writing

by Emily Curtin

A recent opportunity to be a judge for Hostos’ annual Women’s History Month Essay Contest gave me a chance both to use the WAC principles for evaluating student writing and to more fully understand the rationale that lies behind them. Over the course of the past year, I’ve learned to re-think the way I should assess and comment on students’ assignments. WAC educators encourage us to put away our red pens while reading student papers, resisting the urge to “fix” every mechanical or grammatical error and concentrate instead on higher-order concerns like organization, clarity, strength of ideas, and the development of an individual “voice.”

Participants in the Women’s History Month Essay Contest, coordinated by English Professors Jerilyn Fisher and Andrea Fabrizio, were asked to choose from a selec-

tion of quotations by contemporary and historical female writers, thinkers and activists and to “create a lively essay in response to the writer’s wise words.” While reading the students’ essays, I found it wasn’t too difficult to overlook technical issues like grammar and spelling. But what I did find

by the experienced professors in our group, while a couple of my top choices were not shared by the group as a whole. Over the course of the conversation, as each of us discussed the rationale behind our decisions, I began to realize just how subjective the process of evaluating student

The winning essays were not, however, necessarily the most technically proficient. I was somewhat surprised to observe that there was less correlation between correct usage and the quality of thinking or presence of individual voice than I would have expected. In fact, the writing of some of the higher-level students sometimes felt stifled or insincere, as though they were aiming not to explore their own ideas and make connections but rather to fulfill some presumed set of expectations for academic writing. This to me demonstrates the importance of one of our jobs as WAC educators—how to spark and nurture student creativity that may have been fettered along the way through encounters with teachers and professors that focus on technical proficiency or “correctness” above all other skills. By encouraging students to see that their own thoughts, observations, questions and experiences are not liabilities in academic writing, but should instead be sources of inspiration, we can inspire students not only to be better writers, but also to make the process of writing more personally meaningful for them.



Eddine Baret, Sandra Joseph, Inez Gallon, Nareth Kun, and Ellyd Gonzalez (and Jr.)

challenging was deciding which higher order concerns should take priority. Of the following, which was the best essay: the one that has a compelling personal narrative, but which strays from the chosen topic? The essay that is well-organized and well-written but which lacks originality and individual voice? Or the more stream-of-consciousness essay which, though somewhat chaotic, seems to strike more at the heart of the assignment?

My familiarity with the WAC principles for evaluating writing did not give me any easy answers to these questions, but in the end I followed my intuition and selected what I thought were the strongest pieces of writing. Discussing the essays with the other judges was a fascinating process for me. For a few categories our choices overlapped, but for some others I was at first surprised by the other judges’ picks. Some of the essays that I’d considered to be relatively weak had been evaluated highly

writing really is. While our common WAC background meant that we all prioritized the higher-order concerns over technical mastery, there was no magic formula for deciding which essays should be the winners. As I listened to the other judges defend their choices, I changed my mind more than a few times, and perhaps helped others appreciate essays they had originally overlooked. It seems to me that this experience has real implications for us as classroom teachers grading student writing. While rubrics may help professors and students prioritize concerns, the process of evaluating writing is always to some degree personal and subjective.

The subjectivity of our (and any) evaluations aside, one thing the winning essays had in common was that they engaged the contest prompts in a personal way, making connections between global and historical women’s struggles and the writers’ own life experiences.

Learning Online: The Writing Intensive Certification Workshop

by Mary Hubbell

As any professor will attest, professional development workshops can be difficult to work into an academic schedule. Professors would rather use their time on campus interacting with students and improving the educational environment of their college. With professors’ busy schedules in mind, the Writing Fellows of Hostos created a new resource: the online edition of the Hostos Writing Intensive Certification Workshop. This Blackboard-hosted course is based on a four-week workshop designed by the Writing Fellows of 2011. It allows participants to work

at their own pace over the course of a semester and is specifically geared to evening faculty and adjunct professors who need to be certified to teach Writing Intensive courses. Two current Writing Fellows, Laura Paskell-Brown and Mary Hubbell, have taken on the task of implementing the new project.

The course is divided into eight modules that ask faculty to address the main components of a well-balanced Writing Intensive course: 1.) creating informal assignments, 2.) creating traditional formal writing assignments (and cutting edge alternatives to those assignments), 3.) developing writing-in-discipline assignments, 4.) developing writing for reading assignments, 5.) scaffolding assignments, and 6.) responding to student writing. By the end of the course, participants have designed their own WI syllabus, interpolating the themes and concepts of the WAC initiative. The workshop itself mirrors a WI course: professors execute assignments that are commonly used in a WI section themselves. Therefore, they have hands-on experience with WI assignments, making it easier to determine how to integrate those assignments into their own courses.

The Blackboard environment offers another advantage: the participants can also interact with one another through the Discussion Board. Writing Fellows help spark dialogue on the site by posting discussion prompts based on the submitted assignments. For example, the Discussion Board recently offered an opportunity for current faculty participants to encounter and respond to the following fascinating anecdote from Professor Andrew London:

Shortly after I graduated Pratt as a painting major in 1990, I became a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I spent countless hours staring at Rembrandts, Pollocks, Rothkos, etc. I fell in love with a different painting everyday, immersed myself in

tour guide stories, and if that wasn't enough, I spent my five coffee breaks in the staff cafeteria arguing, debating, even lecturing other guards about the obscure details of some random painting that I was in love with that day. I learned more about art history in those two years as a guard than I did in the four years I went to Pratt. I learned a lot because nobody was asking me to write formal term papers, there wasn't a Greek art historian spewing out facts in a heavy accent, and I wasn't worried about getting a D. In essence, I would like my WI course to be something like my experience as a museum guard. That means lots of exploration and student centered tasks. Of course, I would require assignments and papers and there would be grades, but I would like the focus to be on ideas and not on only mere facts.

Professor London's comments reflect the desire of many professors to instill a love of learning coupled with a thoughtful and personal response to course content within a collaborative context. His story set the stage for many interesting comments from fellows and faculty, all trying to discover how WAC can help address those concerns. This story, along with others, continues to foster a lively debate on Blackboard among current participants of the course.

The online course is still in an evolving stage and will be refined and polished further in order to meet the needs of Hostos faculty. In the spirit of the WAC initiative, feedback and revision are valued. Professors continue to provide constructive feedback, and fellows continue to search for creative solutions to problems. The Writing Fellows are confident that the online workshop will prove to be a powerful tool for Hostos professors who wish to design and develop WI courses.

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From the Writing Desk

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