Greetings from the WRAC Co-Coordinator

By Dr. Andrea Fabrizio

Welcome to this latest edition of From the Writing Desk, the newsletter of the Hostos WRAC initiative.

This year’s edition of our newsletter highlights how the WRAC initiative has continued to integrate writing and reading across the curriculum at Hostos. In their articles, the Writing Fellows share their extensive work with the sciences, the Writing Center, Composition, courses taught in Spanish, and the new Digital Design and Animation Program. In this edition you will also find a review of Rewriting: How To Do Things With Texts by Joseph Harris, and a discussion of teaching students to read difficult texts, as well as a diagram of the writing requirements and writing support that exist at Hostos which will eventually be developed into a print and online resource for students.

We see our newsletter as a way to keep you up to date on the work WRAC is doing at Hostos, but we also hope that reading about the work your colleagues are doing with WRAC will inspire you to incorporate meaningful and innovative opportunities for reading and writing into your courses.

I would also like to take this opportunity to introduce myself to you as the new Co-Coordinator of the WRAC program at Hostos. Having been a Writing Fellow myself at Hostos from 2003-2005, it has been a tremendous experience to join Dr. Linda Hirsch in the coordination of a program that has had such an impact on pedagogy and professional development at Hostos.

It has been an honor to work with an amazing team of Writing Fellows this semester and I would like you to join me in extending appreciation, and in saying goodbye to five of our Writing Fellows who will be leaving us this year: Anamaría Flores, Roderick Graham, David Pier, Kate Wilson, and Mayida Zaal. Their creativity and dedication have helped the WRAC initiative at Hostos to grow and flourish. Adriana Pérez will be staying on and we look forward to welcoming five new Fellows to our initiative in the fall. I would also like to thank all of the faculty who have worked with the WRAC initiative for their time and dedication to providing our students with significant and engaging opportunities for writing and reading.

If you would like to:

- Develop a Writing Intensive Section
- Design a new reading or writing assignment for your course
- Consult with a Writing Fellow about how to incorporate more reading and writing into your class
- Participate in a WAC workshop
- Contribute an idea for a future WAC workshop or event
- Contribute an article on your work with WAC to the next edition of our newsletter

Please contact me at afabrizio@hostos.cuny.edu or at extension 6697.
What Are Our Students Saying About Writing?

By the WRAC Team

As part of the ongoing CUNY-wide effort to evaluate the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative, we ask the students in all the Writing Intensive classes to complete a questionnaire designed to help WAC evaluate its impact on student learning, test performance, and writing skills level at the end of the fall and spring semesters. We then carry out a statistical analysis of the questionnaire and write a report. This data is always available for perusing in Dr. Fabrizio or Dr. Hirsch’s office. Over the course of the 2007-2008 academic year, 699 students were surveyed, and this is what they had to say about writing:

—Students reported overwhelmingly that the formal (graded) assignments helped improve their writing. In the fall semester, 92% of students reported that graded assignments helped, and in the spring, this number rose to 95%.

—The majority of students consistently reported in both semesters that revision facilitated better papers on their part: 74% in the fall, 77% in the spring.

—91% of the students in the fall and 89% in the spring told us that informal (not graded) writing was a significant factor in their learning how to think and write with more clarity.

Friends, Lovers, or Strangers: WAC and Composition

By Anamaría Flores (English)

Questions pertaining to the relationship between WAC and Composition studies have been raised at nearly all of the CUNY-wide WAC events I’ve attended during my two years as a Writing Fellow: What is the relationship between the two? Is there a relationship between the two? Are the two one and the same?

At Hostos we are actively exploring these questions as a means for solidifying the important relationship between WAC and Composition. As part of this work, we recently collected data from the Composition teachers in the form of a thirteen-question survey, co-created by Dr. Sue Dicker, the Deputy Chair of the English department and the course manager for ENG 110, and me, with input from the rest of the WAC team.

The information we’ve gathered will allow teachers to benefit from one another’s hard work and expertise as we work toward the goal of unifying the curriculum in English 110, the first-year mandatory writing course at Hostos. Moreover, WAC’s participation in putting together and distributing the survey, then gathering the data and producing the report, will help point the WAC team to where we can best direct our energies and expertise in our work with Composition studies.

In order to determine how best the WAC initiative can offer support to Composition teachers and which forums will lend themselves to a back and forth discussion about WAC/Composition pedagogy, we asked the respondents a variety of questions ranging from the challenges they face teaching Composition 110 to the way that they organize their course (thematically or rhetorically) to the number of written pages they require. Other questions asked the teachers to describe a lesson that has gone particularly well, a lesson that they would like to improve, the kinds of writing they do in their classes, and how they prepare their students for the departmental-wide final exam.

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Based on the answers we received, WAC has already been able to suggest some ways we can work with Composition, even though the report is still in its preliminary stages.

The question asking the teachers to describe a lesson that has gone particularly well, for example, lends itself to a “Best Practices” presentation while a roundtable format could facilitate a dialogue about the mandatory end-of-the-semester research assignment (i.e., How do the teachers approach it? What is the assignment? How do they weave research in throughout the semester?). WAC would serve as the facilitator for these events, providing the space for the professors to get together to share strategies for teaching Composition. And there are other possibilities: workshops, putting together a handbook, and future surveys. The report itself—which will be distributed to all the composition teachers as well as the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the English department—along with the survey that will be kept on file by WAC, are the departure points for all these possibilities.

Writing in Science
By Mayida Zaal (Urban Education)

In science, writing is as significant as being able to conduct an experiment, balance an equation, or prepare a slide. Scientists use writing in multiple ways: to pose problems, to communicate their hypotheses, to report their findings, and to critique one another’s work.

For students enrolled in science courses, writing can be used as a pedagogical tool to learn and to demonstrate understanding. It is also an authentic skill that can be applied in the field to write laboratory reports, technical reports, science abstracts, and case studies. Developing a WI (Writing Intensive) section in the sciences can be a complex and sometimes challenging task.

At Hostos there is growing interest among science faculty in creating WI sections of core courses such as Anatomy & Physiology and Environmental Science, to name a few. Over the course of this past year and in response to growing need, Writing Fellows at Hostos have created a Science Committee to coordinate resources and share ideas, WI syllabi, and assignments. We have sought out effective practices that apply WAC principles in the sciences both at other CUNY campuses and on university campuses across the country. We have found that when working with faculty on creating a science WI, we must consider certain questions: What is the purpose of the course? What kinds of authentic writing tasks can students expect to demonstrate in the workplace? In what ways can writing be used to learn the course content, and how can writing serve to assess understanding?

Equally important is considering writing activities that incorporate other modes of learning and engage students by using technology. Whereas we found there to be great Interest among science faculty, in practice, the challenge is blending WAC principles while not dramatically shifting the purpose and requirements of the course. This requires great flexibility, innovative thinking, and sometimes a willingness to suspend the traditional ways in which writing has been conceptualized in the sciences.

I have been working collaboratively with Drs. Zvi Ostrin and John Gillen of the Department of Natural Sciences to develop a WI section for Anatomy & Physiology II. We have found that in order for the syllabus to be successful, the fellow-faculty interaction must be dialogical. For instance, practices that are successful in humanities or social science disciplines cannot be imposed on the natural sciences without modifications. Moreover, WAC Fellows...
need to understand the requirements of such science courses and find ways in which WAC principles can be incorporated without altering the content of the course. Dr. Ostrin emphasizes that “it is very helpful to work with a Writing Fellow who has coursework in the field.”

Our shared goal in developing a WI section has been to create both formal and informal writing activities that help students master content, and engage them with difficult concepts in alternative ways. Professors Ostrin and Gillen have been innovative and creative in conceptualizing assignments that cover the material in science while also engaging students in meaningful opportunities for writing.

In addition to creating opportunities for students to revise their lab reports and write out descriptions of detailed diagrams and explanations of complex processes, Dr. Ostrin has created an innovative video-based project that engages students in learning difficult scientific concepts while using technology and creativity. Working in small groups, students create a scientifically accurate video of a particular system of the human body. They may use imaginative and artistic approaches to represent the content and the questions they develop for their classmates may appear on the final exam.

It will be exciting to watch the development of these and other projects students produce as a result of their enrollment in this WI section and others like it in the sciences. Dr. Ostrin expressed that working on a WI syllabus has “enabled him to think differently about pedagogical approaches that can be incorporated in the sciences.” If Dr. Ostrin’s experience is any indication, we can rest assured that the intersection of WAC principles and the natural sciences is indeed generating positive results.

Writing in the Digital and Aesthetic Ages

By Roderick Graham (Sociology)

We label the times in which we live as the Digital Age but we can also think of the early twenty-first century as an Age of Aesthetics. Consumers are now paying more attention to the aesthetics of the things they buy: style and form are no longer sacrificed for substance and function. It not only has to work, but look good too. These two imperatives of our age—technological proficiency and the importance of how things are presented visually—converge in Hostos’ Digital Design and Animation (DDA) Program, headed by Professor Rees Shad.

A strong advocate of the importance of writing within his discipline, Professor Shad is spearheading the development of several Writing Intensive sections in the DDA program.

He has recently completed development of a WI section of the course, “Media Design in the Digital Age.” Professor Shad is also in the process of developing two other WI sections, “History of Electronic Music” and “Game Design.” In developing these sections, Professor Shad will provide his students with opportunities to use writing to grapple with issues that are germane to digital design. Moreover, the process of writing-to-learn will help his students to become more effective communicators.

Professor Shad’s philosophy is that “each class has a narrative project,” whether they are designated WI or not. He described one such project from his “Digital Toolbox” class where students must write a script and conduct a recorded interview. Professor Shad’s emphasis is on the importance of communication even when text is not used because aesthetics cannot be disentangled from communication. He suggests that “students are composing with images. In a still moment the picture relates a narrative.”

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Professor Shad sees writing and communication as an integral part of the overall mission of his program: “I’m not all that interested in the students being technical… it’s more about time management and communication skills.”

He goes on to suggest that while students are gaining some degree of technical proficiency, the rapid changes within the field of digital technology make it a necessity that students also learn general skills such as communicating within their discipline, and collaborating with others to complete projects.

It appears as if Professor Shad and last year’s CUNY WAC/WID speaker, Dr. Richard E. Miller, Dean of the English department at Rutgers University, have been sharing notes. Last year as part of my professional development as a Writing Fellow, I attended a WAC one-day conference at the Graduate Center where Dr. Miller spoke about new directions in the teaching of Humanities. His discussion focused on the imperative relationship between aesthetics and technology, a relationship that is not always fully explored in the Humanities. Dr. Miller argued that a viable technique for the teaching of Humanities can include students working collaboratively to compose narratives using both text and images, for example, or having the students reading texts and responding to them online.

While Dr. Miller gives lectures across the country advocating the idea that Humanities departments begin anticipating the digital and aesthetic imperatives in the very near future, Professor Rees Shad—through the use of WAC principles within the Digital Design and Animation Program—is preparing students for these imperatives now.

Engaging with Texts: All the Right Moves

By Dave Pier (Music)

This year, I’ve worked with several Hostos professors to improve library research assignments. As part of this work, I have been meeting regularly with students to learn about the difficulties they experience in conducting research.

Students are often informed in assignments that they need to use a certain number of sources of certain kinds (e.g., "two books and three scholarly journal articles"). For some students, working with such texts can be challenging. Journal articles and other dense scholarly texts present special problems, but even non-scholarly publications such as newspapers can be unfamiliar and difficult. Students have trouble not only in comprehending texts, but in responding to and otherwise engaging with them in their own writing.

Here is a standard process I see students adopt. Go to the library. Find a book or article on your subject (any book or article). Pick out a passage (any passage). Quote it somewhere in your paper (anywhere). Cite it in MLA or APA format. Turn it in.

Students start paragraphs with unframed quotations. They quote at length in brief papers and quote basic facts that don't need to be quoted. They seem to have only a minimal understanding of what they read: what kind of source it was, who wrote it, and why.

Problems that emerge in student writing, such as plagiarism, may be connected to students’ inexperience in engaging with difficult texts. The students know they have to "use" texts, but lack the intellectual tools to carve texts into pieces and connect the pieces to their own thoughts.

Students find it easier to write research papers when their professors take time in class to lead them through the processes of engaging with difficult texts. Students are likely to have fewer problems with scholarly journal articles if their teacher dissects one with them in class. They can also benefit from dissections of newspapers and other primary sources.

From my work with students I have found that they have an easier time completing a research assignment when they are

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assigned small, targeted, research exercises to prepare them for more substantial ones later in a semester. The multiple skills required for a large research project can be learned through a series of small exercises, each of which focuses on a specific problem in reading and/or writing about texts.

There is a book, available in the Hostos library, which provides good ideas for engaging-with-texts assignments. It’s called *Rewriting: How To Do Things With Texts* by Joseph Harris. Harris isolates different "writerly moves" that students need to learn when it comes to engaging with other authors' texts in their own writing: 1) coming to terms; 2) forwarding; 3) countering; 4) taking an approach. “Coming to terms” means fairly assessing a text while “forwarding” means passing a piece of text on, in order to make a new argument. “Taking an approach” means borrowing not just a piece of a text, but another author's style of argument, and “countering” means building an argument against a text.

All of these "moves" are more active and argument-oriented than the moves that tend to be impressed on students as important: quoting and citing. Students who come to talk to me seem most concerned with getting their APA or MLA formatting right. Such formatting issues are often given paragraphs worth of attention in syllabi and assignment sheets, so it's no surprise that students think these are extremely important.

Of course, we want students to learn how to cite properly. But I suspect what we really want is for students to learn how to engage critically with a book or an article, or, for that matter, a page on the internet. If we emphasize this in our classes, syllabi, and assignments, our students might just get the message.


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**WAC in Spanish**  
By Adriana Pérez (History)

At Hostos, as in other institutions with large populations of ELL (English Language Learner) students, most of the academic efforts are geared—and understandably so—towards English proficiency which leads to reading and writing becoming linked to English, and English only. The principles of WAC are not language-specific, however, the primary objective of WAC pedagogy is to use writing as a tool to develop critical thinking. Through a variety of writing assignments including writing-to-learn activities and discipline specific writing, WAC pedagogy aims to make students better writers and better learners. These principles apply whether students are writing in English or Spanish (or any other language for that matter).

In order to provide students taking classes in Spanish with opportunities to write, the WAC team at Hostos collaborated with faculty who teach courses in Spanish to introduce WAC principles and strategies in their classrooms. Professor Luis Pelicot, who teaches in the Natural Science department, responded enthusiastically to this opportunity, and since the fall of 2008 we have been planning together how to bring WAC into his Spanish language Biology 110 course. We began by surveying the students’ interests in relation to writing in Spanish and detected that a great deal of student anxiety came from the fear that they don’t write “correctly.” We thus decided that our starting point would be to address this concern in a mini-workshop on spelling and the use of punctuation. Our main focus, however, has been to provide students with opportunities to write in and outside the classroom by developing informal writing assignments. For instance, after a textbook chapter has been covered, students describe what they have learned in their own words for homework. Following WAC pedagogy in regards to informal (“low stakes”) assignments the writing of this
description is not graded, but students must turn it in. Other writing exercises have been designed as in-class activities that are used, for example, to quickly review materials from past lectures, or to get students to reflect on the connection between the course material and their daily lives.

As we see it, the implementation of WAC principles and writing-to-learn activities in the Spanish-speaking classroom benefits our students in at least three tangible ways: their written Spanish will improve, they will retain information better, and most importantly, students will acquire critical thinking skills. These are all perdurable abilities that will carry over to future learning opportunities, including English classes and Writing Intensive courses.

The project of putting WAC into practice in Professor Pelicot’s classroom is still in progress. So far, the students have been very vocal about their appreciation of this new opportunity, which gives us confidence that we are on the right track. We look forward to continuing our work next semester.

WAC and the Writing Center
By Dr. Andrea Fabrizio and Kate Wilson (Theatre)

Both Writing Across the Curriculum and the Writing Center emerged historically from the same educational formations in the 1970s, and both promote the same ideals about the efficacy of writing in students’ academic careers. Both provide support and services for helping our students grow and develop as writers. Because they share many of the same goals, this academic year, the WAC initiative and the Writing Center have worked to establish a systematic and sustainable collaboration to align the pedagogical transformation WAC advocates with the support the Writing Center offers.

It is mutually beneficial for the Writing Center and the Writing Across the Curriculum program to work together. Since the WAC initiative supports faculty as they work to incorporate meaningful opportunities for reading and writing into their classes and tutors help students learning from those syllabi, it makes sense for both groups to work in tandem. Much of the collaboration this semester has centered on tutor training. Fellows aim to tutor the tutors to strengthen the Center’s core staff so that they may in turn better guide their tutees. Fellows run one-on-one workshops to help tutors help students make the most of textbooks, difficult readings, or readings outside the Humanities (most tutors come from the Humanities). Fellows have also been coaching small tutor teams across the semester. From this collaboration, Writing Fellows also have the opportunity to learn from the tutors what students are struggling with and the challenges that arise when students are asked to complete writing assignments. Because Writing Fellows tutor students only when they are working with a professor to pilot a WI, they rarely have the opportunity to see the long range impact of WAC pedagogy on student writing; working with the Writing Center creates this opportunity. WAC’s ongoing dialogue with Center Director Jennifer Maloy and her tutors refines the repertoire of “best practices” related to writing and reading.

WAC and the Writing Center have also worked together this semester to develop a workshop for tutors about responding to discipline specific writing. It is often challenging for tutors to work with students writing in disciplines other than English such as Science and History, and this workshop aimed to provide strategies for addressing tutors’ concerns.

It is ideal for all corners of the campus that work in writing to cooperate systematically. The WRAC and Writing Center connection bodes well for such a campus writing and reading network across Hostos.

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Writing plays a significant role in a Hostos student's college career. Hostos students have to pass through milestones: the ACT (now CAT), the CPE, the mandatory English courses and Writing Intensive sections. At the same time that it levies these requirements, though, Hostos provides a medley of services to help students meet them. The information about all these pieces exists, but not yet in a consolidated form. This semester I have been designing a diagram to illustrate the separate phases of student writing at Hostos, combining both requirements and support. After refining the diagram, we intend to post it on the WAC website and print it as a flyer to hand out to students. As a schematic, it is reductive; of course students write throughout their college career, beyond these requirements, and not all students use all of these services -- yet we wanted to include them all in this at-a-glance format. What's here is a work-in-progress: we invite your suggestions for improving it.

Picturing Students’ Writing Path

By Kate Wilson (Theatre)

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