



WAC NEWS

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"Writing is more than communication. It is a means of learning, thinking, discovering, and seeing."

– John C. Bean

WAC WORKSHOPS: INFORMAL WRITING SERIES

This semester's workshop series—"Informal Inquiry: Teaching Students Writing-to-Think"—highlighted the crucial role of informal writing in the writing process, from exploring ideas and dialoguing with sources to preparing for formal writing.

The workshop discussions focused on strategies for integrating informal writing into courses and developing students' awareness of the benefits of informal writing, and were grounded in a variety of assignments contributed by faculty from across the disciplines. The sharing of successful assignments with fellow teachers was, according to participants, one of the workshops' best features.

Sample assignments from **Professors Joseph Dorinson (History), Laurie Lehman (Education), John Lonie (Pharmacy), Bernard Schweizer (English) Sophia Wong (Philosophy)** and presentations by **Professors Halbert Barton (Anthropology), David Spierer (Sports Science), and Jessica Trubek (Education)** detailed how informal writing assignments may be used to encourage dialogue between students and instructors.

"I wish I could teach every course this way," enthused **Professor Barton**, who uses short, informal in-class writing assignments in his Anthropology 137 to promote in-class dialogue.

The final workshop culminated in an interdisciplinary collaboration which exemplified WAC ideals: Working in small groups faculty generated a number of informal writing assignments for a Writing Intensive course which **Professor Lonie** is currently developing. Everyone benefited. Workshop participants applied ideas discussed in the workshop, and Professor Lonie walked away with a cache of informal writing assignments.

In addition to sharing personal experiences and assignments, participants read articles by biologist **Randy Moore**, "Does Writing About Science Improve Learning About Science?" and **Robert H. Frank**, "Students Discover Economics in Its Natural State," to stimulate discussion.

We thank all the participants for their input.



Professors Xia, Dolinsky, and Langlois, ARC Director Courtney Frederick, and WAC Coordinator Tina Erickson discuss possible informal writing assignments for Professor Lonie's evolving Writing Intensive course.

FACULTY PROFILE:

Writing to Learn in Exercise Physiology I

When it comes to incorporating writing intensive requirements into a course, all syllabi may not be created equal – and not all disciplines may seem, at first glance, equally compatible with the task. From dance and music to chemistry and philosophy, instructors from disciplines across the curriculum are, understandably, sometimes challenged to develop ways to use writing assignments as a means of helping students to learn course material.

One instructor who is up to that challenge is **Assistant Professor David Spierer**, who joined the LIU Brooklyn Campus School of Health Professions in fall 2005. With the support of the WAC Office, Professor Spierer is currently developing a syllabus for **SPS 152: Exercise Physiology I**, a core course for Sports Science majors which also fulfills the University's requirement for Writing Across the Curriculum.

By including a series of writing activities he calls a "human lab" journal into his syllabus, Professor Spierer innovatively incorporates writing to enhance students' learning about how the body adapts to physical movement.

While students study concepts such as the cardiovascular and pulmonary systems, or human energy transfer and expenditure, Professor Spierer will require them to keep a journal in which they apply the processes they read about in their textbooks to their own bodies or to others whom they observe using specific evaluative criteria learned in class.

By performing – and recording – such experiments, students will be able to effectively process the more abstract information they study by using direct observation and careful writing rather than relying solely on rote memorization. Professor Spierer explains: "Since Exercise Physiology is a subject that is often conceptual and, therefore, does not emphasize practical application, this 'human lab' writing exercise is designed to engage students and, hopefully, make it real for them."

Professor Spierer also advocates what he terms a "scaffolding" approach to writing formal papers. For SPS 152, as well as other courses he teaches in the Sports Sciences, he requires students to turn in parts of their final research paper in stages, beginning with a research topic and progressing towards sections, drafts, bibliography, and finally a finished, polished paper.

Professor Spierer has found that this multi-stage design not only significantly adds to students' learning, but allows for more revision earlier on in the process, resulting in a stronger end result.

In this WI course – a discipline in which writing might not necessarily seem easily applicable – Professor Spierer's use of the "human lab" journal and the "scaffolding approach" to writing formal papers demonstrate inventive ways in which writing can be a valuable tool for learning in any class – for students and instructors alike.

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Check the website for information on the WI requirement.
www.liu.edu/brooklyn/wac

Departmental *WI* News:

The following courses in the major are designated Writing Intensive.

Anthropology:

- ANT 137, Ethnography

Art:

- ART 101, Caves to Cathedrals

Business:

- FIN 115, Financial Statement Analysis

Dance:

- DAN 205, Dance History

Division of Sports Sciences:

- SPS 194, Senior Project
- HS 603, Independent Study

English:

- ENG 101, Introduction to English Studies
- ENG 190, Senior Seminar

Foreign Languages:

- FRE 106, Advanced French Tutorial in French Literature
- SPA 106, Tutorial on Peninsular/Hispanic Themes

History:

- HIST100, The American Experience

Journalism:

- JOU 119, News Writing

Media Arts:

- MA 164, History of Photography
- MA 187, Introduction to Film Studies
- MA 239, Survey of Computer Arts

Music:

- MUS 107, Music History

Nursing:

- NUR 254, Introduction to Professional Nursing

Occupational Therapy:

- OT 620, Research Proposal Writing
- OT 720, Community Practice, Education, and Health

Philosophy:

- PHI 196/196, Honors Study in Philosophy

Political Science:

- POL 128, Race, Sex and the Law

Respiratory Care:

- RC 205, Cardiopulmonary Medical Sciences

School of Business:

- MAN 131, Managerial Communication

Social Work:

- SWK 115, Introduction to Human Services and Social Work

Teaching and Learning:

- TAL 350, The Developing Child

WAC TIPS

At the end of the semester, typically on the last day of class, professors routinely hand out evaluation forms to students.

Sometimes these are standardized forms, prepared by the University or by the department or both, and the enterprising faculty member may supplement these with a form he or she has prepared, tailored to the specifics of the course.

Once the students fill out these forms, the instructor reads them, and is buoyed by student praise of what worked, or takes scrupulous note of student suggestions for improvement, or is dismayed by student complaints.

The irony of this process is that, while the concerned instructor makes use of this information to develop the course the next time he or she teaches it, the information comes too late for it to be of any use for the class the "feedback" is from.

By waiting until the end of the semester to ask students about the course they're taking, we close off the opportunity for feedback that may be useful not only in future semesters, but in the present as well. Feedback is most effective when it can be applied immediately, and the best way for this to happen is not through end-of-the-semester evaluations but by providing opportunities throughout the semester for dialogue with students.

This dialogue should be initiated through writing. Unless a professor is on comfortable terms with the entire class--an ideal situation but not always a reality--any attempt to have an "open" discussion with students about how class is going is likely to be met with some wariness or even discomfort. Or it may be mistaken by students as an occasion to "complain" in ways that are not helpful to improving the course.

Asking students to write out their feedback prompts them to be more focused and specific, especially if you word questions so

RE-EVALUATING EVALUATION FORMS



that they guide students to constructive criticism: What is the most important concept you have learned today (this week) (this month)? What aspect of this course is giving you the most difficulty, and why? How can I help you with this problem? What might you do to address this problem?

Once you've written questions that will elicit helpful responses, you can hand out index cards to students, or ask them to write responses on a sheet of paper and to hand them back with without identifying themselves.

Anonymity encourages students to express themselves freely, and the questions help to focus their responses on aspects of the course you would like to hear about. By reading the students' responses, you can get a sense of what's on their minds.

Feedback is most effective when it can be applied immediately, and the best way for this to happen is not through end-of-the-semester evaluations but by providing opportunities throughout the semester for dialogue with students.

The immediate feedback, however, should also be seized as an opportunity to talk to students.

After reading the responses, you may, during the next class, want to talk about the ones you found most helpful (and the ones you found least helpful), and discuss with students how to address their comments and concerns.

An advantage of this approach is that you will be able to assess more precisely what is happening in a course, rather than going by "impressions." More important, rather than merely accepting these impressions and having them confirmed or contradicted at semester's end, you can act on student feedback. And, most important, you will have shown students--by asking for feedback throughout the semester--that they can collaborate with you on helping to make their learning and your teaching as effective as possible.

By asking students for written feedback during the semester, you will insure that students will fill out their end-of-semester evaluation forms not just for the benefit of future students, but in affirmation of what they gained from their dialogue with you.

WAC Meets WebCT: Faculty Development Online

Looking for a sample WI syllabus? Interested in seeing what some of your colleagues are assigning in their WI courses? Want to get advice from a colleague who has taught a WI course? It's now as easy as WebCT.

Faculty can now find materials from WAC workshops on WebCT.



We have found that instructors appreciate the chance to see the creativity and ingenuity their colleagues apply to teaching. In an effort to aid this practice, we have posted extensive material from past workshops, including samples of assignments and syllabi, as well as practical and theoretical material regarding critical pedagogy and writing-to-learn principles central to our workshop discussions.

Faculty can now also post questions and insights to the WAC WebCT discussion board to which their colleagues may respond. Instructors who often find themselves too busy to leave their offices, much less their departments, can now engage easily in dialogue with colleagues across disciplines.

As an added benefit, instructors who are curious as to how they might use WebCT's discussion board to facilitate their own classes or who wish to familiarize themselves with WebCT technology will now have the opportunity to see how this kind of communication works--its strengths and its limitations-- by using WAC's WebCT module as a "test" run.

If you would like to have access to the WAC WebCT classroom, please contact Sarah Blazer at sarah.blazer@liu.edu