Lessons from Physicians: WAC Strategies Transform “Literature and Illness”

by Jason VanOra and Dr. Frances Singh

We recently reshaped “Literature and Illness” into a Writing Intensive section, with a variety of writing assignments designed to enhance students’ active engagement with the course material. We recognized that the original research assignment, part of the syllabus Dr. Singh had inherited, was written in a way that invited plagiarism, something Dr. Singh had dealt with in the past. Recognizing that when students plagiarize they almost always do so out of desperation (because they either lack the skills to complete the project or because of poor time management), we sought to develop a new research assignment that would be both manageable and challenging, with clear instructions and opportunities for revision throughout the semester. This new assignment, intended to help students learn more about how illness is experienced within personal, social, and medical contexts, was modeled after a series of writing exercises developed by the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. We found that by adapting these exercises to the needs of Hostos students, we helped students to forsake their dependence on Google and write more informed, reflective, and original papers.

Calling this new assignment a “pathography,” we asked students to write a story about a patient that included 1) a clear explication of her/his illness; 2) her/his personal and psychological response to the illness; 3) the doctor-patient relationship; and 4) the larger familial and social contexts within which the patient is living. Whether students chose to write about a real or imagined patient, they were expected to draw on peer-reviewed journal articles to aid them in explicating the illness. Since we already knew that students had problems selecting and making sense of online, peer-reviewed sources, we took them to the computer lab and directed them to databases and specific articles that were relevant and within their grasp. In order to build student confidence in their own expressive abilities, we had them practice paraphrasing, quoting, and using MLA citation format as we walked around the room giving them on-the-spot feedback.

We were able to facilitate students’ success at meeting the substantial demands of the pathography by implementing two central WAC strategies. First, informal writing-to-learn activities enabled students to “think on paper” about the illness they were studying and how it would affect the patient. One such task included writing informal letters in the voices of writers (continued on page 2)
Literature and Illness (con’t from page 1)

Alice Walker and William Carlos Williams, who convey radically different approaches to patient care. This exercise helped students understand how doctors’ treatment styles affect the patient’s well-being, and ultimately it prepared students to write more formally, empathetically, and analytically about the interactions between their own imagined doctor and patient within the pathography.

Secondly, scaffolding gave students the knowledge and confidence to address the central questions within each section and to manage the multiple demands of the pathography in a timely fashion. For example, in the third section of the pathography, students were required to submit two formal pages in which they developed the doctor-patient interaction. To help them achieve this goal, students started with a character sketch in which they answered a series of questions about both the doctor and patient. They then used these descriptions to write a dialogue between the doctor and patient, which they field-tested by engaging in a role-play activity with their classmates. We found that by scaffolding this portion of the paper through these earlier exercises, students were prepared to address the more formal prompt about doctor-patient interaction. The bonus was that because students were encouraged to include snippets of their dialogues in the formal piece, they did not need to cut and paste materials at the eleventh hour from the internet in order to complete the task.

Upon reflection, we have learned a great deal about the effectiveness of WAC strategies across disciplines and levels. First, we recognize that the interdisciplinary nature of WAC strategies enables students to complete both the literary-based requirements of the pathography (creating dialogue and analyzing texts) and the more science-based requirements (describing the symptoms and etiology of an illness). Moreover, we are reminded that WAC strategies are not simply methods to facilitate success among community college students. Rather, they are part of the pedagogic repertoire of faculty within prestigious graduate and medical programs, such as Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons. By employing these WAC strategies rigorously and consistently at Hostos, we provide students with an effective template for thinking, writing, and reasoning that will guide them throughout their academic careers.

Lessons from a Technology WI
by Tina Lee

My first assignment as a Writing Fellow at Hostos was to help create a Writing Intensive (WI) course with Professor Carol Huie in the Computer Information Systems and Technology Unit of the Business Department. Although I am computer literate, I know little about information systems and how they are used in the business world. Thus I felt unsure about what I was doing and how I was going to be helpful. Our work together was ultimately successful, however, and the experience provides some concrete lessons about creating assignments and teaching new concepts in introductory classes.

From our first meeting, it was clear this would be a positive working relationship. Professor Huie was clear about what she wanted from her class, and she already had her students engaging in writing-to-learn assignments, which made it easy for me to gauge how the assignments were working. Our task then was fairly straightforward: we needed to look carefully at the purposes and goals of current assignments and then create new, more precise assignments out of the remaining materials.

It was immediately clear that the purpose of Professor Huie’s existing writing-to-learn assignments was to get her students to think critically and to move beyond just the rote memorization of concepts and terms. We did notice, however, that some of the questions allowed students to look in the textbook for a one-word or one-sentence answer, so we began to revise these assignments. We talked about her goals so that we could create prompts, questions, and formats that would generate the type of learning experience she wanted students to have. We asked students to think about the role of technology in their own lives, to think about how one would purchase the right kind of technology for a specific task, and to explain computer jargon in plain language to family members or to fellow students in a brief “weekly computer column” that might appear in a school newspaper.

We also talked about ways to use a few minutes of class time in writing activities that would help students to process and retain information from lectures. For example, Professor Huie might ask students to write for five minutes at the beginning of class about what they understood from their textbook reading and what they were still unsure about. Or she might ask them to stop and define a concept in their own words, and then to share their definitions with the class. These activities ask students to activate prior knowledge and connect it to new information—key factors in cognitive development.

Next, we set to work on her formal writing assignments. First, we created an assignment that was similar to Task 1 of the CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE) in order to give students exposure to the kinds of writing done in the information technology field for trade journals and Web-based publications. This CPE-type assignment also allows the students to explore issues covered in class and in the textbook in more depth and to weigh the pros and cons of different approaches to problems in the field. An assignment such as this also gives students an opportunity to practice for the CPE, reducing some of their anxiety and allowing them to hone the skills necessary to complete the exam successfully. We found two articles that dealt with computer security and created the (continued on page 3)
Based on your reading of these two articles and what you have learned so far in class, answer the following question: What would you argue is the best way to keep personal information secure—high-tech security methods like biometrics, low-tech solutions such as limiting to whom one gives information like social security numbers, or a combination? Describe each position and explain which you favor (or explain why both are needed). Support your opinion with concrete examples and information from the articles. You should refer to specific parts of the article and cite them.

After feedback from the WI Task Force, we decided to replace a standard research paper assignment with an expanded version of our "weekly computer column" (originally informal writing). We created four formal assignments that asked students to explain basic computer topics in plain language. Here is one of our column prompts:

The second month's column: "Software." What are the two major kinds of software a computer uses? Explain to your fellow students what each type is, what it does, and why it is important. Give advice about what you believe is the best operating system and which applications software a student should choose for their home computer. Explain why you are making these recommendations. Include a description of how the operating system allows the user to interact with the computer.

All in all, I am pleased with the work Professor Huie and I did together and I think our experience holds some important lessons for professors working on WI courses. First, it's important to begin with a clear idea of what we want students to learn and what our goals are for the assignments we create. Once these are clarified, assignments can then be created that are effective and focused. Second, writing is a good way to help students truly understand and absorb a new vocabulary and set of concepts that can then be applied to problems in the real world. Telling students to put things in their own words is one way to teach vocabulary, but this is not always successful, at least in my experience. Giving students an audience to whom they must explain a concept in concrete and clear language is another exercise that might prompt students to articulate and think through new ideas. After all, there is truth to the idea that "we often inform ourselves by speaking out loud to others" (Fulwiler, 277). At least in my own teaching, I really learned some concepts in my field when trying to write a lecture about them for my students. An assignment like our computer column gives students a chance to articulate their ideas on paper as if they were the educators. In short, the process we went through in creating this syllabus illustrates how effective writing assignments can be used to enhance student learning, the goal of WAC and of Writing Intensive classes.


Who Said Fellows Don't Teach?

by Anamaría Flores

When I found out that I was going to be a Writing Fellow at Hostos last spring, I felt conflicted. On the one hand, I welcomed the break from the seemingly endless piles of papers, the office hours, and the commute to Flushing from the South Bronx. I also needed some time away from my students, who looked to me as a mentor, social worker, and a teacher. Although Latina/o and Black professors are commonplace at Hostos, they are rare at Queens College, something that filled my classrooms with students of color (who were also advised to take my courses by The Office of Minority Student Affairs & Pre-Professional Advisement). Even though I was happy to provide support to students of color beyond teaching, wearing all those hats was exhausting. By becoming a Writing Fellow, however, I could devote more time to writing my dissertation which is, of course, an objective of the fellowship. Moreover, I thought that it would be fun to work with professors creating Writing Intensive courses, and thus far I have been right.

On the other hand, I knew that I would miss seeing the faces of my students light up as they talked about African American, Latina/o, Caribbean, and Latin American literature and postcolonial theory, and I would miss reading their writing and talking to them about ideas. In short, I knew that I would miss teaching something fierce, my occupation year round for the seven years I've been a graduate student. It did not occur to me that there might be some overlap between the fellowship and teaching; in my mind, the two were diametrically opposed.

It was therefore a pleasant surprise to recently realize, in the course of a conversation with my sister, that the work I do as a Writing Fellow is teaching, albeit of a different sort than the composition and literature courses I typically teach. Fellows work collaboratively with teachers; the three professors I am working with, for example, have looked upon me as a valuable colleague who has important information to share. They even introduce me to their students as "Professor Flores." My fellow professors see me as an expert at teaching writing and they have been enthusiastic about implementing some of the strategies and assignments that I've suggested. Moreover, I learn from the professors I work with. This semester, for example, I have learned how to use Blackboard, I have been introduced to Caribbean texts that were unknown to me, and in a few weeks I'll be tagging along on a field trip to the City Morgue.

I am thankful to Professor Eunice Flemister in the Health and Science Department, Professor Sandy Figueroa in the Business Department, and Dr. Carlos Sanabria in Humanities for allowing me into their classrooms. This is a sign of trust; teachers don't turn

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Turning Gobblers into Gourmets
by Dave Pier

It has been stimulating to visit natural science classrooms at Hostos and compare the style of learning there to what I’ve experienced in humanities and social science classrooms. In science classes, a main challenge before students is to assimilate a great bulk of information. Students must answer questions such as: What are the functions of the different parts of a cell? and How do you balance this redox reaction? In humanities and social science classrooms, on the other hand, the challenge is often to interrogate sources of information and opinion. Questions include: How were this author’s observations preconditioned by the historical period she lived in? and How have my own reactions to this text been preconditioned? Beginning science students must develop the ability to swallow (and keep down) large amounts of information, whereas beginning humanities and social science students have to learn to be picky eaters. Both kinds of learning ability are necessary for advancement in any intellectual field: once science majors get past the basic terminology assimilation stage, they’ll be in a position to start interrogating conventional scientific wisdom; once historians learn to interrogate sources, they’ll have to start developing a comprehensive knowledge of a corpus of texts. In everyday life, we interrogate and assimilate, so it is good that college students get practice in both.

Having acknowledged an assimilation/interrogation dichotomy, we should not allow it to grow absolute in our minds or in our classrooms. As learners, we have all experienced how interrogation aids assimilation, and vice versa. When there is overemphasis on the “internalization of knowledge that is externally available,” crucial processes of “creative and independent knowledge construction” tend to shut down, to the detriment of assimilation as well as interrogation (Iran-Nejad, 574). Writing Fellows have been collaborating with science professors to come up with ways of introducing more “creative and independent knowledge construction” into courses. Writing, as WAC theorists conceive of it, is essentially interrogation: it “begins with the writer’s awareness that a problem exists” (Bean, 19). The student engaged in critical writing is not like the gobbler, who sees the information-food as something she must eat as quickly as possible, but like the gourmet, who approaches the food quizzically. She pauses, if only for a split second, to consider what she is about to eat, and what she has eaten already, before tucking in.

Issues of interrogation and assimilation arose in my discussions with Professor Flor Henderson about General Biology. Below are two issues we discussed, along with two solutions that involve writing.

1. In biology class, you have to learn a lot of terms. In one class I attended, eight terms went up on the board in the space of about five minutes: mitosis, meiosis, chromatin, chromosome, sister chromatid, somatic cell, sexual cell, centromere. While the professor’s lecture and board work were organized and clear, I could see the students’ heads whiplashing. Some students, no doubt, hadn’t opened the textbook that week, and were confronting a lexicon entirely foreign to them. Others may have looked at the textbook and memorized some of the terms in advance—but had they adequately grappled with them, grouped them, prioritized them?

This is where in-class, low-stakes writing can make a difference. Instead of asking the classroom at large what a specific term means and waiting for a spoken answer (cue the sound of frantic paging through textbooks), the professor can ask the students to close their books and write what the term means in their own words. This way, the professor gets to find out right away whether the students really understand a term. More importantly, the students get to find out whether they really understand it. All the students—not just the called-on ones—are compelled to interrogate, on paper, their knowledge of the term.

2. In biology class, you read one big textbook. An introductory science textbook reminds me of a big complete meal: porterhouse steak, potatoes, brussels sprouts. It’s all nutritious, and the object seems to be simply to get as much inside you as you can, as quickly as possible. In many humanities and social science courses, students get to be more finicky and at the same time more experimental eaters. Rather than one big book, they purchase a pile of mismatched paperbacks. They then learn in class that this tasting menu is a compromise, with inevitable shortcomings. Thus they get a good steeping in intertextuality, learning that one book lives in the shadow of another; one poem may make better sense in terms of others; a play should be read with its possible performances in mind. Intertextual reading—understanding how a text fits in or clashes with other texts—may be the most important intellectual skill students can develop in our information-overload age. When class readings are taken exclusively from a single, authoritative textbook, students get no practice in comparing sources that coexist in an open intellectual market.

Introductory science teachers need not and should not abandon standard textbooks. It is possible, however, to introduce short texts from outside the textbook, in order to give students a taste of scientific (or even pseudo-scientific) discourse in the world beyond the classroom. Professor Henderson and I assigned two readings from outside the textbook about a controversial biology-related topic and had students write a short essay discussing each in terms of the other. This assignment gave students some practice in intertextual reading, and helped them prepare for the CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE). I found two opinion pieces—a magazine article and a book introduction—that dealt with the nutritional values and dangers of different kinds of fats. I’m excited that students are reading about biology outside of the textbook. Like their fellows in the humanities and social sciences,
they are learning how to be discerning readers, not just gobbling ones.


**Faculty, Fellow, and Renaissance Drama**

by Kate Wilson

Faculty may ask how Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) can help them get students engaged with difficult texts, such as 400-year-old drama. As a Writing Fellow I ask, how can we do this as a team? How does this Fellow relationship work? The WAC process runs on a social dynamic, on one-on-one interactions between faculty and Writing Fellow, like those I experienced with Professor Maya Sharma. For the goal of a writing-intensive syllabus on Shakespeare, Dr. Sharma brings erudition in English literary criticism, while I come as a theatre scholar and artist, in a collegial collision that gradually converted her *Hamlet* segment into Writing Intensive mode.

While Dr. Sharma works the keyboard, we inch over the old syllabus. One of her first assignments asked students to rewrite the new king’s monologue in their own phrases, an inviting exercise that seemed to want only a little clarification of the instructions. We scroll down to the next writing assignment: As a member of the royal court, write a letter arguing whether or not the new king will make a good king. “But,” I object, “you’ve already paid enough attention to that character in the earlier assignment.” A volley of ideas follows. Which characters should it focus on? One of us suggests *Hamlet*. Why does Dr. Sharma want the letter genre? She sees letters as suitable for Renaissance literature especially. What is the final goal? Our views collide: Professor Sharma wants students to recognize a specific theme immanent in this part of the play, loyalty, while I urge a more open-ended, exploratory prompt—come what may. Our newly negotiated prompt reads:

Pretend you are Hamlet and write a letter to your college friend. In this letter explain your opinions on loyalty to your family.

We concur that this prompt will encourage students to engage with the plot and think about the theme that matters to Dr. Sharma, while leaving room for their own discovery.

Our own dialogue about Shakespeare’s dialogue meanders through literature pedagogy, the virtues of this or that comedy, the usefulness of editors’ introductions. From those lofty views, we descend to nuts-and-bolts details: the timing of formal assignments, the build-up to the final research essay. We test assignment wordings out loud, to wit:

KW: Something like, “how the women’s positions in the play reflected beliefs of the era”?

MS: *(typing)* “How Shakespeare’s women characters reflect the attitudes of...”—should I say “Tudor times?”

KW: If you’ve taught them “Tudor” by that point, go for it.

*(A digression on how she learned—and I didn’t—England’s royal genealogy.)*

MS: Never mind. *(Typing)* “How Shakespeare’s women characters reflect attitudes of the Renaissance.”

After finishing the *Hamlet* segment, I check that Dr. Sharma feels comfortable with this way of working on the syllabus. She approves of the dialectic alchemy: “It works well when you steer me back to actual classes with our students.” I joke that I’m her traffic cop—a playful moment in our partnership on teaching plays. Our one-on-one dynamic between fellow and faculty is the crucial conduit in the process, a backstage preparation before the syllabus will guide students to engage difficult material. It’s this old-fashioned mode of oral dialogue that leads to new modes of writing about written dialogue.

**A Writing Center For All Disciplines**

By Jennifer Maloy

Part of the Hostos Academic Learning Center, the Writing Center provides one-on-one and small-group tutoring for students who would like help making their writing better. Our tutors are talented and well-trained Hostos students, CUNY undergraduate and graduate students, and professionals who are committed to working with students from many disciplines and at all points in their studies at Hostos. We can help students with essays, reports, CPE/ACT preparation, grammar, and conversation skills, depending on the needs of individual students and the suggestions of their instructors.

We believe that writing is a process, and that writers can benefit from suggestions from other writers at all points during their composing process. This means that students can visit for a variety of tasks: get help starting a writing assignment; talk through ideas for essays and projects; plan and organize their writing; revise a draft; understand feedback from an instructor; and learn and practice grammar.

Our goal is to help students improve their writing skills. Instead of fixing or proofreading a paper for students, we help students learn how to improve their writing. While learning to be a better writer takes time and effort and can be frustrating at times, our tutors provide support and encouragement to students as we introduce them to a variety of techniques to make their writing clear, coherent, and well-organized.

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The WAC Clearinghouse: A Virtual Community for WAC Professionals
by Roderick Graham

Sharing ideas and teaching strategies is important for the general growth of knowledge in a discipline or sub-discipline. Each institution within CUNY has created its own website to facilitate the sharing of ideas. Writing Across the Curriculum—including Hostos’ own WAC website (www.hostos.cuny.edu/wac). There was, however, a need for an intercollegiate website that pools resources from across the country. The WAC Clearinghouse (http://wac.colostate.edu/), hosted by Colorado State University, was developed to fill this need. It is, in my opinion, the most extensive collection of journal articles, books, contact information of leading WAC scholars, and other resources currently on the web. There is much to like about this website, but there is room for improvement. Below is a brief review of the Clearinghouse that ends with a suggestion of how CUNY faculty can help address its weaknesses.

The Clearinghouse is divided into five sub-sections: 1) Journals, 2) Books, 3) Resources, 4) WAC Network, and 5) Research Exchange. There is also a separate section for creating accounts—a necessity if one wants to access many of the site’s features. The organization of the site is on the whole very good. The main page and its links are intuitive, but the site can bog down as there is frequently too much information listed on one page.

The emphasis of the Clearinghouse appears to be the compilation of relevant research and publications about WAC, as indicated by three of the subheadings: “Journals,” “Books,” and “Research Exchange.” This leaves much to be desired if you are a teacher looking for ways to incorporate writing into your class. Fortunately, this situation can be rectified rather easily, as I will explain in closing. The Research Exchange sub-section includes a listing of numerous WAC abstracts. I looked over these abstracts and found an unexpected and pleasing variety of scholarship: from applying writing intensive lessons in an engineering program at MIT, to a study of the effectiveness of peer review in classrooms, to a survey given to 17,000 U.S. college graduates who were educated through WAC curricula. Also, two journals are featured: Across the Disciplines (http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/) and The WAC Journal (http://wac.colostate.edu/journal/).

The Clearinghouse also features the International WAC Network (INWAC). As a scrolling list of names, institutions, and conferences, this network is serviceable, but I find it wanting. In this era of sophisticated social networking applications, I would have expected something more dynamic. Still, the Clearinghouse is a good place to find scholars and teachers of similar interest. John Bean and Toby Fulwiler are just a few of the many WAC notables who can be contacted through INWAC.

With its emphasis on research and its position as the primary “cyber-place” for sharing ideas, the WAC Clearinghouse is superior to any WAC website I have seen. As I mentioned at the outset, however, there is potential for development. The WAC Clearinghouse could benefit from more members who contribute lesson plans, syllabi, and assignments. CUNY WAC professionals can contribute to the Clearinghouse enterprise. The writing activities that have survived a semester within our classrooms deserve to be shared with others. I urge instructors and coordinators to register your institution and contribute as much as possible to the WAC Clearinghouse. To register, follow this link: http://wac.colostate.edu/login/create.cfm. Registration is quick and easy, requiring only your name and a valid e-mail address.

Who Said (continued from page 3)

their students over to just anybody. The three of them have generously invited me into their classrooms to give what I call “mini-lessons” on writing fundamentals and also to conference with the students during the revision process. Here also I am teaching, but in this case teaching students rather than the professors. As with working with professors, being invited into someone else’s classroom is not the same as running your own course but, as I’ve learned, there are many, many different ways to teach, and this is just one of them.

As my first year as a Writing Fellow draws to a close I notice that I no longer feel conflicted about my fellowship at Hostos. Becoming conscious of the fact that my work as a Fellow is another form of teaching has helped me to harness creativity and enthusiasm as I help to develop a literature course, guide students through the revision process, and create assignments that are currently being piloted. I’m really glad that I became a Fellow as this position has led to my maturation as a teacher of writing. I’m looking forward to my next year of work at Hostos and to applying what I’ve learned during these two semesters in my own classrooms, something I’ll be able to do this summer when I teach a Writing Intensive course at Queens College.

For more information about WAC at Hostos, contact the WAC Coordinator

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